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**WITHDRAWN**  
The last twelve years of Joseph Conrad

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THE LAST TWELVE YEARS  
OF JOSEPH CONRAD

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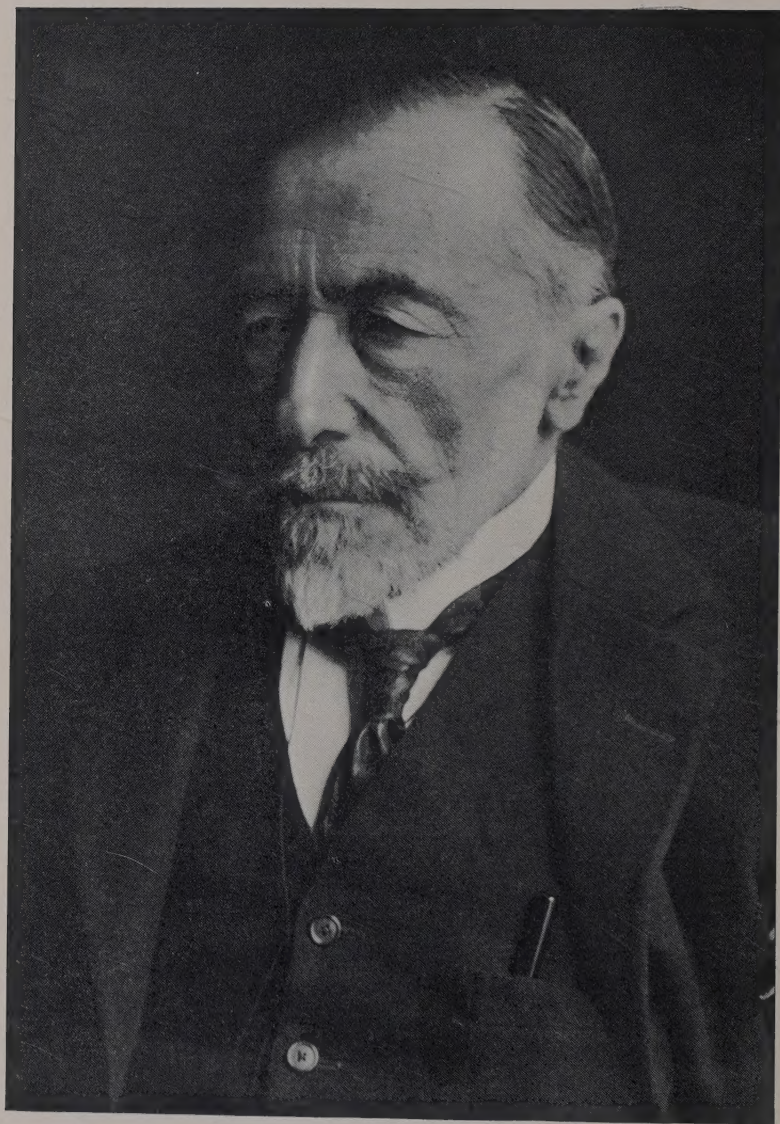
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THE LAST TWELVE YEARS OF  
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CONRAD TO A FRIEND: 150 SELECTED  
LETTERS FROM JOSEPH CONRAD  
TO RICHARD CURLE





Joseph Curran.

In 1923



THE LAST TWELVE YEARS  
OF  
JOSEPH CONRAD

BY  
RICHARD CURLE

---

One's literary life must  
turn frequently for sus-  
tenance to memories and  
seek discourse with the  
shades

*A Personal Record*

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1928

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK





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FIRST EDITION

To  
HUGH WALPOLE  
whom I first met under  
Conrad's roof-tree



## PREFACE

*I was an intimate friend of Joseph Conrad during the last twelve years of his life, and in the pages of this book I have tried to give a picture of him that is both truthful and convincing. In doing this I have relied almost entirely upon my own memory, fortified by Conrad's correspondence with me. For the purpose of my study is really to supplement the facts that are already known, and to put Conrad, as a man, in as complete a light as I can.*

*Conrad's was so many-sided a nature that I do not suppose for a moment that my portrait will satisfy all his friends. But at least it has the benefit of accuracy within its scope, which is more than can be said of some of the statements relating to him which have found publicity since his death. I scarcely know of any great man who has been the victim of so many posthumous misconceptions.*

*It would be easy to argue that the title I have chosen is much too sweeping. But if to the written words, "The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad," be added the unwritten ones, "As seen through the eyes of a friend," the title is, I think, justifiable. And I can only hope that, in trying not to exaggerate, I have not missed the picturesque. If I have done so, it shows a deplorable inadequacy on my part, for Conrad's personality was so brilliant and impressive that if I have succeeded at all in suggesting it I must, in the very nature of things, have written a picturesque book.*

R. C.





## CONTENTS

Preface	v
I. Conrad as a Friend	1
II. The Personality of Conrad	22
III. Conrad's Talk	41
IV. How Conrad Worked	61
V. Conrad's Attitude to His Own Books	79
VI. Conrad's Ideas on Art	103
VII. Conrad at Home	121
VIII. Conrad in Prosperity	136
IX. Stray Recollections of Conrad	152
X. Conrad and England	165
XI. Conrad's Fame in America	181
XII. Conrad's Last Day	194



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Conrad in 1923	<i>Frontispiece</i>
Conrad in 1914	68
Note in Richard Curle's Copy of <i>Almayer's Folly</i>	92
Mr. Epstein's Bronze of Conrad	108
Oswalds	124
Conrad standing between Captain David Bone and Mr. Muirhead Bone on board the <i>Tuscania</i>	156
Conrad in 1919	172
Conrad's Grave	204



THE LAST TWELVE YEARS  
OF JOSEPH CONRAD





# THE LAST TWELVE YEARS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

## I

### CONRAD AS A FRIEND

I CANNOT, I think, do better than begin these reminiscences of Conrad by explaining how I myself came to be his close friend, for it was that friendship which is the justification and excuse for the following chapters.

It all started through an article I wrote for a long since defunct periodical called *Rhythm*. In this article I expressed, above all, my admiration for *Nostromo*, that great epic of South America which the critics and the public alike had hitherto almost ignored. Mr. Edward Garnett, the discoverer of Conrad and one of the foremost interpreters of his genius, showed it to the author, who was pleased at the recognition—he wrote to him at the time, “That criticism is something and no mistake. All that went before seems mere verbiage in comparison”—and expressed some curiosity as to the writer. He was good enough to say that he would like to meet me one of these days.

At that time there was a restaurant in Gerrard Street

called the Mont Blanc—it, too, is now as dead as *Rhythm*—and every Thursday (if I remember right) it was the custom of various literary men to meet there at lunch. Mr. Garnett was the pivot of those gatherings, and his wide acquaintance with the literary world used to bring thither such men as W. H. Hudson, Edward Thomas, Perceval Gibbon, W. H. Davies, Stephen Reynolds, Norman Douglas, and many others. One never knew whom one would meet—the party from week to week would expand or contract like a concertina—but always one did know that someone would be there whom it would be worth meeting. At that time I attended pretty assiduously, more especially to meet Hudson, with whom I was friendly, and I recall now the excitement with which I heard from Mr. Garnett that next week Conrad himself was coming and expected to see me. He was seldom in London in those days and did not hanker particularly after literary society: the chance was not one to be missed.

Of course I knew him at once by his photographs. We were introduced, and he gave me a friendly, inquisitive look as much as to say, “Well, now, what sort of a fellow are you, after all?” There were many people present that day, and Conrad was animated. Now and again he would glance at me, but naturally in the midst of his old friends he and I exchanged very few words. But after lunch I remember walking away with him and his asking me whether I would care to

run down one evening and spend the night at his house in Kent. There was only one answer to that question, and so it happened that a few weeks later, in the December of 1912, I found myself at Capel House, Orleston, his home about five miles out of Ashford.

I ought to be able to recollect every moment of that visit, but the truth is that it has become blurred. The impression remains but the details have mostly gone. It was the first of so many visits, of so many talks, that it has just melted into the mass of that voiceless remembrance which makes Conrad live for me with invincible vitality. But I remember that after dinner he led me into the drawing room—it was before the days when he had a study of his own—and that we talked into the small hours. He was in his most sympathetic mood, that mood of wise advice without a touch of condescension, and time slipped by all too quickly. I could not take my gaze off him, I kept thinking to myself, "Here I am, actually sitting with Conrad, actually listening to him," and I would have been quite happy not to have gone to bed at all.

It was of literature he talked mostly, of his work and even of mine, and there was in his whole manner something that put me extraordinarily at ease. In the presence of this distinguished stranger I felt myself suddenly in the presence of an understanding friend. There was, indeed, no one better able to win trust than Conrad. In conversation he immediately put himself on the level

of the man he was speaking to, and, without disguising his own point of view, tried to appreciate the point of view of another. His voice on such occasions was engagingly confidential, and his eyes took on a wonderfully kind expression. Perhaps on that evening he was touched by my eager attention and my real love for his books, but at any rate his manner already made me feel at home with him. Then and there I resolved that if I could win his friendship I would. And I was not without hope, for it was a much more promising start than Boswell had with Johnson, and if Boswell could succeed in the end, why might not I?

I had to leave early on the following morning, but it was not at all like leaving some celebrated man whom one has been allowed to visit once in that spirit of exaggerated homage which usually ends in irritation. I felt that Capel House would see me again, and I had a good look at it by the light of day. It was a typical Kentish farmhouse, standing away by itself in the midst of flat fields; and in its very isolation, infused with homeliness, there was something almost symbolic to me of Conrad's aloof genius and friendly personality. How often on subsequent summer afternoons Conrad and I have sat in deck chairs on the rough lawn above its old and weedy moat, enjoying the solitude and the sun. I can see him now, waving his hand at the oak woods beyond and saying, "How I hate the feeling these woods give me of being shut in!" In a sense my happiest recollec-



tions of Conrad are bound up with Capel House. There was an informality about the life there, a warm comfort, which were never quite caught again in the grander surroundings of Oswalds, where he spent his final years.

But I run on too fast. Looking back, I find it difficult to recall how our friendship ripened, and that is probably just because it was a natural growth which knew no sudden steps or changes. Very shortly after our first meeting Conrad was treating me as an old friend. Some chord had been struck which rang true, and I can say that for the next twelve years no other chord was ever struck between us.

Yes, the friendship matured quickly, and it was not long before I told him how anxious I was to write a study of his works. From one of his earliest letters to me I venture to quote some words which show how the idea struck him:

My dear fellow, I am unaffectedly glad to know that you are undertaking the task. All I can say is that when you want me for anything I am at your disposal—to give information or elucidate a point. I say this without reserve because I feel a complete confidence in you.

To be frank, I do not think that when the book did appear it particularly impressed Conrad, but he was much more concerned to cheer me up in the face of the bad reviews than to criticize it adversely himself. Let me give one extract from a letter which describes his solicitude:

I snatch this piece of MS. paper after reception of 2 more reviews to share my impression with you. Well, I must say that the book is receiving a magnificent acknowledgment of its existence anyhow. That you are attacked causes me great pain—but there can be in it for you no sense of defeat. I've told you that you would have brickbats thrown at you. You jostle too many people's idols for my sake. . . . As time goes on a reaction is sure to set in, for no amount of envenomed comment can obscure the merit of the work. . . . If I were sure of how you take it my satisfaction would be complete.

And all through our friendship that really was his way. He used to say to me, "You are the one great friend I have made in later years—the last of my great friends," and I think it was a comfort to him to know that I was at hand to keep him company and even at times to sit silently with him. All abiding friendships depend, I am sure, on subtle and unanalyzable reactions. The words with which we explain our likes or our dislikes do not really give the clue to why we like or dislike people: that is the result of natural sympathy or natural antipathy. And I believe that the secret of our friendship lay in a kind of mutual comprehension, not calling for words. So many people got on Conrad's nerves, so many opinions jarred upon him, that he found it a relief to have someone who happened to look at the world more or less through his own eyes. He said to me once, "On the surface you and I are very different, but *au fond* we are alike," and by that he meant that our attitude to life had something in common. I know myself that his views were nearly always my views, not so

much on literary questions as on the broad questions of existence. Our understanding of each other was perhaps more intuitive than conscious: I was very often puzzled in my efforts to keep up with him (although he did once write to me, "You know what I mean—because you *do* know me"), and I remember, on his part, his saying to me, "I am not sure that I have ever understood you, but what I know is that I trust you." And yet, in spite of all this, we did understand one another in the only way that matters—the way of instinctive sympathy.

Conrad had many friends who were dear to him, and the fact that he usually preferred to have them staying with him one at a time proves that from each different friend he derived a special kind of pleasure and sustenance. And the kind of pleasure he derived from my friendship was essentially that of feeling completely at ease. He knew that I appreciated his point of view, he knew that I would not worry him when he was in his nervous moods; he felt, in brief, that he had discovered a friend with whom companionship called for no effort. At least, that is how I read it.

I was only one of his friends, and like the others, I had my own special niche in his affections. But whatever my friendship may have meant to Conrad, his friendship meant a great deal more to me. Association with that illumined mind threw a new colour upon life and made many things seem different. Moreover, I have never known anybody else to whom friendship was so living

a force. He was not only glad to see one when one turned up, but he was constantly arranging that one *did* turn up. He was always sending me notes suggesting week-end visits, he was always anxious to know exactly how I was progressing and what I was doing. There was nothing negative about his friendship; it was the friendship of a man who really did take an interest in one and really did want to enter into one's daily life.

I could give many instances of this, but I will confine myself to a few. I remember once bringing out a volume of short stories and sending a copy to Conrad. He read it forthwith, liked the contents, and immediately took the first train from Ashford to London in order that he might offer me his congratulations in person. Now, what other man would have done that! Here was this famous author, already well advanced in years and a semi-invalid, travelling up to London just to say a cheering word to an unknown writer twenty-five years his junior. And though he hated to see anybody ill, as his wife often used to assure me, nevertheless, when I was very ill during the war he came to London several times to see me and to sit by my bedside. And, most moving recollection of all, I remember that once when I was in great trouble and had written him a veiled letter on the subject he post-hasted to London with the idea of doing something or other to bring happiness out of gloom. His voice comes back to me now: "I am an old man and you might be my son. Why not see if I can do any-

thing?" Indeed, one had to be careful to keep one's deeper worries from him. I have heard him say to me of something not very desperate, "I was thinking all night of what you told me. It's beastly that you should be bothered like this. It quite upset me."

That remark about being his "son" was often on Conrad's lips, and in a manner it is how he came to regard me. He had a kind of paternal affection for me, and I see that in one of his letters, when sending me a present, he wrote:

When I reflect that if I had made an early marriage I could have been (easily) father of a man of your age, this way seems permissible between you and me.

As time went on he came more and more to accept me as a member of his household, and I remember that once, towards the end of his life, when he had made a scheme for settling with his family in the south of France, he sounded me as to whether I would not accompany them as a sort of permanent guest. Of course Conrad's restless mind was always throwing off schemes which meant very little in reality, but nevertheless such a remark shows that his friendship for me was of a singularly unruffled type. In a letter written to me towards the end of 1917 he said, "Outside my household you are the person about whom I am most concerned, both in thought and feelings," and though Conrad often wrote and talked to his friends with an almost Oriental



lavishness out of the sheer generosity of his spirit, yet such words held a true message of friendship. It was not that he "placed" his friends, putting one above the other, but that with some of them he felt more invariably at ease than with others. To have aroused so strong a friendship in a man for whom I had so profound a regard is a precious memory. For that friendship, which began as a literary one, was consolidated on personality. When I first read his writings I instinctively felt in touch with the author of them, and the more I knew of Conrad the more I perceived that my instinct had been justified.

Conrad was completely free from all those angularities and inhibitions that so often prevent one from getting on with people one would wish to get on with. He was quite without eccentricity and quite without intellectual arrogance. One could have spoken to him about anything and he would have understood. He did not put himself on a pinnacle, he did not keep one at arm's length; he was entirely human. And yet, though he never thought of standing on his dignity, he had the natural dignity of a great gentleman. No one ever dreamed of taking advantage of his good nature, for he had an armoured personality on which it would have been impossible to presume. In himself, as in his writings, he possessed the grand manner without a breath of affectation. His courtliness with strangers was marked by the greatest affability, and his fondness for

his friends was expressed by a delicate tact which made each in turn appear the centre of the picture. He was not blind to their faults, and being subject to sudden irritabilities he could say sharp things on occasion, but in his mind their faults were always really rather trivial. They were his friends, and the cutting irony of his intelligence passed them by. He accepted them, and that was the end of it. To be accepted by Conrad was to come within the immunity of his thoughts. Indeed, to that handful of his friends who were closest to him Conrad's attitude was marvellous in its indulgent completeness and comprehension.

And if Conrad cared deeply for his friends he was, in his turn, much beloved. If to few people friendship meant more than it did to him, few awoke in others a stronger feeling of devotion. And this was not because he was a great writer, not even directly because he possessed a remarkable personality, but because he had a rare charm and gave out in full measure to his friends from the rich stores of his nature.

And yet, for all his friendliness and sympathy, there was something baffling about Conrad: the more one knew him the more one perceived the limitations of one's knowledge. In his nature there were many silences and reserves. He never said all he thought about any one subject at any one time, and thus he often appeared to contradict himself. There was a curious caution about him, and he would walk round a subject examin-

ing it from different angles. Moreover, extraneous influences might tinge his momentary conversation in a manner not truly representative. I sometimes wondered whether I really knew what Conrad thought ultimately about anything. But that is a problem which I shall discuss more fully in another chapter, and here I would only emphasize that, however uncertain one may have been of Conrad's true opinions, there was one thing one was always certain of and that was his staunch affection.

Oh yes, one was always certain of that. For it was not a matter of words, it was a matter of deeds. There were people enclosed invincibly within the rim of his friendship, and those were the people he really wanted to see. He loved to entertain his friends in a style he thought worthy of them—and Conrad's friends were, in his eyes, worthy of everything. When some old friend would be coming down to lunch, his eagerness that things should be just right was delicious. What was there for lunch; what wine would so-and-so prefer; had the car been ordered for the station; what suit should he himself wear; was everything in apple-pie order? And then, when he heard the car draw up outside, how he would hurry, or, alas, often hobble, out into the hall to be the first to greet the arrival with outstretched hands and words of welcome.

His fond regard for his friends had something playful in its genuineness. He liked to chaff them gently, he liked to call them either by their Christian names or



by names of his own choosing, which, as it were, bound them to his heart and put the seal of his approval upon their personalities. Thus his wife was "Chica" or "Mrs. C."; Sir Hugh Clifford, "The Governor"; Mr. Pinker, "J. B."; Mr. Cunninghame Graham, "Don Roberto"; Sir Sidney Colvin, "Sidy," and so on down the list.

Giving was one of the chief pleasures of Conrad's life. He much preferred entertaining to being entertained, and he had a keen delight in choosing presents for his friends. He had discovered a bric-à-brac establishment in Hythe, of which he became a regular patron, and I fancy that nearly all his friends treasure mementos of his shopping expeditions. He would think out gifts to please them, weighing the pros and cons, and then he would go to endless pains to get precisely what was in his mind. It was all part of his expansive nature and of his zest in friendship.

In truth, his generosity to his friends knew no bounds, and I fear that he was sometimes imposed upon. I remember once finding him, when I came down to breakfast, in a state of agitation over a cable he had had from an acquaintance asking for an immediate loan of £250 if ruin was to be averted.

"What am I to do about it?" asked Conrad.

"Do you feel you must do something?"

"Yes, something, but I can't afford £250."

"Then why not send £50?"

He followed my advice, and I believe I am right in

saying that he never so much as got an acknowledgment.

Most people live up—for the time being, at least—to the estimate formed of them by other people, and I think that if Conrad got the best out of his friends it was due to the faith he had in his friends. He seldom rubbed them up the wrong way or made them feel uncomfortable. On the contrary, if he was at all well he tried to fit himself into their particular moods. I know, for instance, that he detected very swiftly any change in myself. Whenever I arrived at his house he would look scrutinizingly at me and put a few leading questions in that charming way of his. I have no doubt that he did this with all his friends. He wanted to get in touch with them at once. He wanted them to feel completely at home. Conrad had his own code, but he was not censorious. He had too wide a knowledge of humanity and too deep a compassion for suffering. One could, indeed, have talked to him as to a Father Confessor, and I should suppose that there were no intricacies of the mind beyond his reach. Indeed, his sympathy was such that he would soften his vehement antipathies in the presence of a friend who held different views. There was no name in literature that Conrad detested more than that of Dostoievsky, and usually the mere mention of it drove him into a fury, but I recall that once when he was talking about him in my presence he purposely kept the note low, prefacing it with the remark that I

must not mind what he was saying, because, of course, he knew that I admired Dostoievsky. And that in itself was a tremendous concession from Conrad.

And just as Conrad delighted in giving material gifts, so did he delight in giving praise. He bestowed upon the work of his friends an apparent enthusiasm, which, I am bound to say, did not always represent his matured opinions. And to that extent his letters are often misleading, although the emotion which prompted them was entirely genuine. He avoided discussing too critically the work of his contemporaries, especially when he knew them. I have heard him say of some living author, "I like him and I don't want to talk about his books." He hated the jealousies of literary cliques, and was at once too indifferent and too sage to enter into comparisons with other people. He knew that time would settle all these questions, and he had not the slightest intention of putting forward his own claims or of deprecating the talent of those he cared for. And one must remember that when he praised the book of a living author he really praised it, not in relation to literature in general, but in relation to the author's past performances. Conrad quickly sized up a man's capacity, and if that man was his friend he rejoiced to see him living up to expectations or, above all, transcending them. It gave Conrad no pleasure to find fault, but it did give him great pleasure to say a cheering word. But when goaded beyond endurance by tactless people who would

try to force an admission out of him that he admired work which he did not admire, Conrad was not above very plain speaking. When he began a sentence with the words, spoken in a fiercely provocative tone, "I want to know . . ." then one presumed that trouble was at hand. And sometimes when discussing another's work—if that other was not a friend—Conrad would pronounce sentence upon it by remarking, "I see no hope." He would make such a remark with reluctance, but nevertheless with finality. It came from his lips like a sentence of extinction.

There were many occasions on which Conrad felt languid and depressed. At such times he appeared to be surrounded by an imponderable darkness and to recede far out of one's orbit. It was then that the companionship of a man like myself, with whom silence created no tension, soothed his nerves. Certainly I was able to save him from a number of small worries and to do a number of small commissions for him, but in the main it was my mere presence that did him good. I remember that when his agent, Mr. J. B. Pinker, died, he immediately sent me a telegram to come and be with him. It was not really that I could do anything to help, it was just that he wanted, in his distress, to feel that I was by his side. In some mysterious way we were harmonious to one another, and I like to believe that my company lightened the burden of his inner solitude.

Conrad would interest himself in things merely be-

cause they interested his friends. Being a book collector, which seemed to him a mild form of insanity, I naturally collected his first editions. But when he got over his initial bewilderment Conrad, instead of being contemptuous, began to enter into the spirit of the game. I asked him if he would write notes in the various volumes, and this he willingly undertook to do, although it must have been a nuisance. In the earlier days, when I was starting the collection, I would sometimes arrive down at Capel House with half-a-dozen volumes ready for his notes. He would take one up with a quizzing air, turn it over in his hand, and remark knowingly, "That's a fine copy you've got." And then he would sit down at his desk, with the book open at the flyleaf before him, dabbing his pen on the blotter or making some little mechanical design while he thought out what he would say. And then suddenly he would begin to write. Finally he would hand the book back to me with a smile:

"How's that?"

"That's fine, Conrad."

"Now for the next one!"

He used to say to me, "I want you to have something that nobody else has," and in the result my collection acquired a unique quality. When he came to see me in London he would stare at the rows upon rows of his books on my shelves with a sort of surprised wonder. I expect that in his secret thoughts he never ceased to regard the whole thing as an idiotic fad, but, as I say,



he interested himself in the collection just because he knew that it interested me. Conrad was not the sort of man to insist on uniformity of taste: the fad might be idiotic, but if it pleased me, then why should he not encourage it?

In all Conrad's real friendships there was mingled much anxiety. He was deeply affected by what happened to those he cared for, so deeply affected, indeed, that bad news was quite capable of bringing on an attack of gout. He would discuss his friends by name, one after the other, summing up their chances, analyzing their position; and the relief when he felt assured that they were in smooth waters was intense and obvious. And when he talked of those he truly cared for, often with a note of reminiscence going far back, his whole manner was softened. It was as if the years had unrolled themselves and the indelible landmarks of his friendships stood forth bright and shining.

With all his outstanding personality Conrad was not at all egocentric. He thought more about other people than he did about himself, and though he was in some respects a very solitary man, nevertheless his happiness was bound up with the happiness of others. He would have gone to almost any length to help a friend. If things went wrong—and he often knew all about it without a word being said—he would await his opportunity to remark, "Oh, well, my dear fellow, I always felt it would come to this, but I didn't like to say any-

thing: it's not worth your thinking about, anyhow." I can see his gesture of dismissal, the indrawn pause, the sudden shrug of his shoulders and faint movement of his lips and hands. Finished! Thus did he try to comfort one when in trouble and when action was useless.

Looking through his letters to me, I observe how often he would add an inquiry or comment as to my well-being. Here are three in his correspondence of 1922:

I can't let the new month begin without asking how you are. In truth all at once I have become quite anxious about you. Do please drop us a line; a comprehensive line to tell us shortly of your "public" and "private" activities.

God knows—I would like to know that your trouble, whatever it is, is off your shoulders, partly or entirely.

Your wire just to hand. I can't tell you what splendid relief it brought me.

I have said that Conrad was the least angular of men, and yet in some respects he was extremely touchy. There were certain acquaintances of his earlier years with whom he had quarrelled once and for all, and there were others in whom he did not have a complete trust. For Conrad required tactful handling and was ready, on occasion, to take violent and lasting offence. One had to allow for his idiosyncrasies, just as he was prepared to allow for the idiosyncrasies of his friends. But if he felt himself insulted, then all was over. And that, after all, was reasonable, because he had a nice sense of honour in his dealings with his fellow men. Even if I

were in a position to discuss these matters in detail I would not do so, for I have no desire to indulge in ill-natured gossip. But though I think that Conrad did at times form false estimates of people, yet I am sure that he was never purposely unjust. Sometimes he got queer ideas into his head, sometimes he developed immediate antipathies, but as often as not one could trace these things to a belief that the people he disliked had injured the friends he really valued. I can recall several such instances, which were, in their essence, a witness to Conrad's loyalty. As far as Conrad was concerned his friends were always in the right in any outside quarrel: he took their side and nothing could have made him budge an inch. And that, of course, was very agreeable for those whom Conrad had accepted in the fullest sense. I always felt completely secure with him, because nobody on earth could have made mischief between us and nothing I did would have set him against me. I have known him angry with good cause, I have known him angry with bad cause, but I have never known him disown a friend whom he had once grappled to his heart.

Conrad, as I have suggested, was a most considerate man. But he was something more than considerate in his dealings with his friends, he was wise. He did not, for instance, as do so many people, demand that they should like one another. He had compartments for all of them, while acknowledging their differences. If one asked about a friend of his one had not met he was quite



likely to reply, "Oh, I don't know that he's the sort of man you would care for." He was not influenced by anything save his own judgment—and that was why one felt so safe. All his friends might have detested one, but as long as Conrad was one's friend then their words would have fallen emptily upon the air. His manifold nature and wide humanity saw good in the most diverse types, and he was on friendly terms with all kinds of people.

And what remains to his friends at the last is, above all, the impress of his beautiful personality. The genius is for the world, the man himself is their possession. The affection of his nature only deepened with time. His concern for his friends, his happiness in their company, grew stronger every year; it was as if the glow of sunset had enfolded him and thrown its warm reflection upon all those he loved. Friendship itself seems poorer with the passing of Conrad.

## II

### THE PERSONALITY OF CONRAD

WHEN Conrad died, someone who had been in his company but a few hours altogether, wrote to me:

He was, I think, the only human being I have ever met who seemed to merit the word "great"—not in virtue of his genius, but his personality—himself.

These words, startling enough as showing the instantaneous effect he could produce upon a stranger, are nevertheless not an exaggeration. I believe that numbers of people felt like that. It was curious how in so many of the notices called forth by his death it was the magnetic personality which was dwelt upon; and I am convinced that he belonged to the rare type of whom people instinctively say: That was an extraordinary man.

And, indeed, he *was* an extraordinary man. Beyond all the high genius of his creation, he had the effortless greatness of a unique personality. Almost everybody with whom he came in contact felt it, and no one felt it more than those who knew him intimately, for the fascination, being inherent, never grew less. Without a trace of pose, he remained enigmatic to the end.

In the last resort, personality is beyond analysis, and

one cannot but suspect that when all those who knew him shall themselves have gone, a new generation will not be able to approach his books with quite that nicety of perception and sense of an inner pattern which come home to his friends as they feel his presence so vividly and mysteriously about them in each of his phrases and turns of thought.

Much will be written about Conrad in the future, and perhaps perspective will give to pure criticism a keener edge, but when even the second-hand paleness of remembrance shall be a thing of the past surely there will be lacking that final clue, that key which seems at moments to unlock the secret of his achievement and intention and to explain all as by a flash of insight.

And for that reason I think it valuable to recover, so far as can be recovered, the faint echo of his individuality, and to put on record, if one really can put on record, some picture of that spirit which lies like an enchantment upon his books and impressed those who met him with its vitality, its power, and its subtle elusiveness.

Conrad was enormously interested in all the activities of life and in all its phases. His was not a cloistered mentality, wrapped up in its own dreams, but an inquiring one. He was absorbed, so to speak, in the whole mechanism of existence, and I remember his once writing to me:

I am interested even in party politics, the development of institutions and opinions—and emotions of mankind in the mass. I feel

deeply what happens in the world—a genuine sentiment qualified by irony—something like that.

Yes, it was indeed “something like that.” Conrad was, in the real meaning of the expression, a man of the world, following with eager attention its hopes and its changes. But he was not subject to illusions and he regarded the stir around him with a kind of saving irony. He did not think that the millennium was at hand or that social alterations would really affect human nature. Nothing aroused his contempt more than the effort to delude people by promises which were incapable of fulfilment. He detested the glib fatuity of doctrinaires and the calm assurance of revolutionaries, who think, as he says in his Preface to *Under Western Eyes*, that “a fundamental change of heart must follow the downfall of any given human institution.” Conrad was not a pessimist, for he believed that life justified itself, but equally he was not an optimist, for he believed that mankind’s destiny had been written once and for all.

He had an ardent love of letters, but in the ordinary interpretation he was not literary. He lived in, rather than for, his books. They mirrored life for him in the integrity of his artistic conscience, and that is why a knowledge of the man seemed to clarify his pages, and why his pages could often throw a light upon Conrad. In *A Personal Record* he has written:

Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they

must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, amongst others, on the idea of fidelity.

And elsewhere in the same book:

Even before the most seductive reveries I have remained mindful of that sobriety of interior life, that asceticism of sentiment, in which alone the naked form of truth, such as one conceives it, such as one feels it, can be rendered without shame.

These two quotations, it appears to me, reveal the essential Conrad beneath all the variations of a temperament given to many surface contradictions, and of an individuality charged with nervous tension.

There was, at heart, a noble simplicity about his attitude towards life; but he was the least obvious of men and it was often difficult to follow his thought through the complexity of his outer moods and the play of reminiscence upon the argument of the instant. It was so difficult, indeed, that without that insight which arises from intuition all sorts of erroneous conclusions might have been formed. But when one did begin to know Conrad, one saw, as through a mazy forest, the steady beacon of his fidelity to an ideal and to that inner sobriety of which he writes. He never altered in these fundamental things, because his roots were clear and deep. In his whole conception of the universe the ideas of order and duty took first place, and this gave to his outlook an austerity of vision which was philosophic rather than moral. For the weaknesses of humanity he had pity, but for calculated betrayals he had unbounded

scorn. He could be terrible in the presence of falseness.

Mental chaos and disorder were particularly distasteful to Conrad's mind, with its seaman's traditions and its leanings to Western culture, and I sometimes wonder whether his extreme antipathy to the work of Dostoievsky, to which I have already referred, was not really based upon the fact that he saw in this Russian novelist the most formidable of all antagonists to his own theories of a world governed by sanity and method. It is true that Conrad had an hereditary dislike of Russians and that, moreover, Dostoievsky frequently makes contemptuous references to Poles, but I have an idea that his real hatred for Dostoievsky was due to an appreciation of his power. It is on record that he once told Mr. Galsworthy that Dostoievsky was "as deep as the sea," and for Conrad it was the depth of an evil influence. Dostoievsky represented to him the ultimate forces of confusion and insanity arrayed against all that he valued in civilization. He did not despise him as one despises a nonentity, he hated him as one might hate Lucifer and the forces of darkness.

The shadow of suffering never left Conrad, and he was at times inaccessible and ready to misunderstand. But that was only the toxic poisoning of gout, a frayed condition of his system, and it meant less than nothing. I came in for my share of knocks, but I soon learned not to worry my head. Indeed, when he had flown out at me he was always particularly delightful afterwards. I have



known him even apologize and ask me to forgive his exasperation, as it was due to his physical condition. But there was never anything to forgive, for there was never anything that really wounded. The truth is that he had a particular desire not to hurt people's feelings, and that his kindness often made him conceal a boredom and weariness with strangers. Many more people were misled into thinking that Conrad really liked them than were misled into thinking that Conrad was really angry with them. Indeed, Conrad was so charming that people frequently thought they knew him well when they knew him not at all. They fancied they had gauged their man when they had not begun to solve the riddle or even, perhaps, to be aware that there was a riddle. They had seen one aspect of him and one only. Ah, if they had but been conscious, as Conrad has it in "The Return," of "the hidden stream, the stream restless and dark; the stream of life profound and unfrozen"! No, Conrad was the last person on earth capable of being summed up after one day's experience.

But perhaps that is not quite the correct way to state it. Conrad's friendliness to strangers was not in the least put on, but his manner was so warm-hearted that he seemed unconsciously to exaggerate. On the other hand, if they said something that ran counter to one of his cherished opinions he might flare up suddenly and so give them a wrong impression in the other direction. I remember a lady, an admirer of his books, going down

to see him once and suggesting in the innocence of her heart and by way of a compliment that Conrad, the interpreter of mankind, must surely be an internationalist. To this day she has never forgotten Conrad's retort that such subjects were not allowed at his table. She came away thinking he was a sort of ogre, but in reality outbursts like that proved how very human he was. There was nothing cynical about Conrad: if his irony was sometimes savage in its disdain, it was often clement in its pity. His theory of an ordered universe and of a stable society was violently antagonistic to the sentimentalism of radical experimentalists, and he was probably the most authoritative "die-hard" in England. He was armed to the teeth in controversey, and with his wide knowledge of history and his grasp of character the panaceas of certain advanced thinkers left him unmoved. As an opponent of popular democratic fetishes he can have had few rivals. He met the iconoclast and the fanatic completely undismayed and could turn the tables on them with most startling effect.

Conrad loathed the imbecile ferocity that follows so often in the wake of vague and grandiloquent words, but it would be quite a mistake to suppose that he was a reactionary—if that has still any meaning apart from describing a person who thinks differently from yourself. He hated all forms of tyranny, he also abhorred all forms of license. He believed in the great qualities, such as honour, loyalty, endurance, and courage, and he saw



little enough of them in the gabble and egotism of the modern world.

Of course, it depended on how he was approached. His was not an overbearing nature, and there was no point he was not usually capable of arguing about with fairness and good temper. But if there was any assumption of moral superiority, or if people took it for granted that he must think the same as they did, he could be suddenly touched off like a powder magazine. And when he did pounce, it was the pounce of a tiger.

These paroxysms of fury happened but seldom. But after one of them Conrad would sometimes smoulder for hours. It was very curious. He seemed like a man coming slowly back to life out of some hideous nightmare, and I am sure that he underwent at such times a kind of mental suffocation. Then again, being highly strung to an unusual degree, he would occasionally become frightfully upset over what appeared to others a mere trifle. The fall of a pen might set him drumming on the table in nervous exasperation, whereas he would shoulder some bitter personal disappointment with dignified fortitude. His temperament was not an equable one, and the charm of his natural manner made it all the more difficult to appreciate his liability to nervous storms. One learned to know him, more or less, as a pilot knows the intricate channels of an estuary, although, of course, one could never be quite certain whether the sands had not shifted in the night.

To make Conrad at all comprehensible I must insist again on the mingled complexity and simplicity of his character. When he was well in body and spirits there could scarcely have been a person easier to get on with, provided that the undulations of your mind kept level with his. But when he was upset he would retire into eclipsed, nerve-racked ruminations where it was impossible to follow him and where he seemed fearfully alone. Then, indeed, this most approachable of men became the most unapproachable. And yet that state also was simple in a manner, because one knew the cause and knew one must not worry him. There was nothing to be done but wait for the assault to pass. He felt what it was to undergo the most intolerable depression, and he had no antidote with which to ward off the attacks he dreaded. But his courage never failed him, and his tenacity of purpose was terrific. All his writing life he had to contend with ill-health; for most of it with poverty. But he never wavered from his great ideal, never faltered at the task before him, never evaded the problems he had set himself to solve. But can one be surprised if at times he longed for release from the burden of the double pain of his physical and mental suffering? He was battered and tired and his work was accomplished.

What was it about Conrad, beyond the always indefinable, that assured even strangers at first sight that they were in the presence of a commanding personality?

It was, I think, the feeling of his passionate vitality. His eyes, deep-set and shining within drooped lids, had the sort of light in them of eyes that glow in the dark; his movements were unceasing, like the reflections of an inner excitement; his lined face had a mobility that momentarily took on the passing humours of his thought; and as to his voice, it ran from the caressing cadences of old remembrance right up to the vibrant lash of his scorn in tones so modulated and acutely right that a foreigner without a word of English would scarcely have been at fault. It was this enormous force, a force apparent even in his silences, that made him stand out like a man amongst shadows and gave him an almost fatal aspect in the midst of a room full of people.

It was not that he was histrionic or self-conscious. He had no pettiness of that sort. The idea of playing the famous man would have been ludicrous to Conrad, with his sense of values and his fine politeness. No, he dominated because he had the greatness some few men are born with, the greatness of personality. His manner, as I have said before, was quite unaffected. In company he talked and joked with whomever he happened to be sitting next, and he had a wonderful way of accommodating his conversation to his neighbour. But, engaging and sympathetic as he could be, no one was ever in doubt of his mastering power. He was, as one might put it, the personification of reality. As in his books one feels that things could only have happened thus, so in

himself one felt a sense of finality. He could have been no other than he was. This perhaps sounds rather obscure, but what I want to convey is the feeling Conrad gave of having a larger share of life than other men. Nobody knows what personality is, nobody can put his finger upon it, but when it exists overwhelmingly, as it did in Conrad, it can never be mistaken for an instant.

If in some respects Conrad had the waywardness of genius, in other respects he had an extreme solidity. There were, no doubt, depths in his mind which were difficult to plumb, but he had a marked sanity of outlook and restraint of judgment. His view of society was not disdainful, and that is why he was able to enter as an equal into the minds of ordinary people and into the aspirations of mankind as a whole. He had read much, he had pondered much, and having an astonishing memory for what he cared to remember the whole of his experience was, so to speak, at his finger tips. His knowledge of European affairs for hundreds of years back was encyclopædic in its sweep—for example, he seemed to know even all about the obscure ramification of Mediatised princely families—and he would dilate on them constantly, not only with an amazing detail for names and dates, but with an impressive discernment of cause and effect. He knew Polish, English, and French equally well, and he had a grasp of national characteristics which made him apprehend to an almost prophetic

degree the mistakes that countries made in dealing with one another.

And he had the sense not to overtax his memory with things that were to him of no consequence. On such points it was inaccurate and sometimes even non-existent. On his own books, for example. He neither knew nor cared. Often he could not remember where his work had appeared serially; on occasions he would even deny having written things which, on infallible proof, he would later recall to mind. I had some odd instances of this when I was gathering together, out of old periodicals, the material for his *Notes on Life and Letters*. I remember his writing to me on one occasion, "I haven't the slightest recollection of the article 'Books'" (one of the best of his articles), and on another (although it meant that he had forgotten his well-known article on Mr. Galsworthy),

Ever so many thanks for your letter of yesterday inclosing the list of papers for the miscous. volume. It seems to me absolutely complete. I don't think there can be a scrap of my writing hiding anywhere. There is nothing I can remember, at any rate.

Indeed, I sometimes had quite a business to convince him that he was author of his own work. When, near the end of his life, the question arose of reprinting the story called "The Nature of a Crime," which he had written years before in conjunction with Mr. Hueffer, Conrad had forgotten all about it and for a time repudiated any participation. The truth is, he could be hazy to an incred-



ible degree and he could remember with entire precision; and that again—for they seemed curiously the absolute corollary of one another—was witness of his unconflicting dualism.

And this sense of a dual nature was intensified by the feeling one had that his mind was composed of a series of different levels from any one of which to any other of which he might suddenly jump. Everybody, of course, has these levels to a greater or less degree, but few people have ever combined such perplexing extremes in one personality or been more incalculable in their reactions. There were certain remarks that one simply could not foretell how Conrad would take. And, in truth, one could not even be sure whether his most simple moods would not suddenly dissolve before one's eyes and reveal another Conrad altogether. It is not that one had to walk too warily, for he was reasonable in his demands, but that it was literally impossible to catch up always with the nuances of his mind or to be always conscious of the danger signals. And that, of course, made the study of Conrad himself endlessly attractive.

Nobody ever really discovered what went on inside Conrad's brain or pierced very profoundly—even the friends from whom he had fewest reservations—into the isolated silences of his ultimate convictions. All that one caught were glimpses of the stirring pool, but beneath the surface there was a solitary Conrad inexplicably removed from any human being. The deepest lay-

ers lay far out of sight. One could but guess at them by his moods of ironic despondency, aristocratic contempt, or exasperated disillusionment.

His power of visualization was immense. For example, he built up the whole atmosphere of *Nostromo*, which breathes the very spirit of South America, from a few days upon the coast. In 1923 he gave me some facts about the length of his stay on the Venezuelan coast when he was a young man which are well worth recording:

As to *No.[stromo]*. If I ever mentioned 12 hours it must relate to P. Cabello where I was ashore about that time. In Laguayra, as I went up the hill and had a distant view of Caracas, I must have been  $2\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 days. It's such a long time ago! And there were a few hours in a few other places on that dreary coast of Ven[ezue]la.

In the same way with people. He created Almayer, for instance—and one who knew Almayer well says it is a lifelike creation—from being in his company only half-a-dozen times. And as to types, it was quite uncanny the way in which he could get at essentials from a mere touch of personal experience. Conrad knew scarcely anything about civil servants, but Fyne in *Chance* is a typical civil servant; he knew scarcely anything about the police, but Inspector Heat in *The Secret Agent* is a typical policeman. He had that just sense of values which comes from a kind of clairvoyance, and his guesses were more revealing than inside knowledge. But then his guesses always arose from a tiny germ of truth. Indeed, reality,



some actual experience or event, is the basis, however minute that basis might be, of practically all he wrote: his literary life was a reincarnation of his former life. Some little thing—a look, a gesture, a few disconnected words—would awaken his creative vision until it took hold of him and possessed his soul. But there is an inner secret to his books, Conrad himself, cryptic and elusive, which cannot easily be pursued, and, in the upshot, nearly always evades one. This is not the place in which to discuss these works at length, but it may be hoped that one day it will be done in a manner not up till now fully attempted. For they have not yet given up all they have to give.

He had experienced three completely different existences—his youth in Poland, his early manhood on the wide seas, his last thirty years in England—and it may be that the web of these three separate lives, crossing and recrossing in his thoughts, imparted to his conversation that far-off strain which so often marked it, and to his own meditations an almost dreamlike quality of surprise.

I once got him to give me a rather full account of his voyages, which included two to the West Indies, three to Australia, five to the East, others to the Mediterranean, the Congo, South America, and years spent in the Indian Ocean. But Conrad was not a wanderer at heart, though Poland, Capri, Corsica, and such like rather remote places knew him even in the retirement of his

writing life. No! contradiction as it may appear, travel had little attraction for him, and even the exotic scenery he has described so eloquently a relatively small appeal beyond that of the necessary background. He had the sailor's true preference for a friendly home after the restless sea. It was people who interested him, not nature, and though he wrote magnificent descriptive passages, yet I doubt very much whether the wild splendour of the world came home to him so closely as the domestic beauty of the Kent he loved.

And as to the sea, it was the ships and the men in the ships that held his real allegiance. He knew the sea in all its phases, and has written of it with epic grandeur, but it was of the sea in relation to ships and to the hearts of men. He once noted on the proof of an article on his voyages which I had written:

Do try to keep the damned sea out if you can. My interests are terrestrial, after all.

And again, in a letter dated July, 1923, he wrote to me:

You know yourself very well that in the body of my work barely one-tenth is what may be called sea stuff, and even of that, the bulk, that is *Nigger* and *Mirror*, has a very special purpose, which I emphasize myself in my Prefaces. Of course, there are seamen in a good many of my books. That doesn't make them sea stories any more than the existence of de Barral in *Chance* (and he occupies there as much space as Captain Anthony) makes that novel a story about the financial world. I do wish that all those ships of mine were given a rest.

To be called a novelist of the sea always annoyed him beyond endurance. He was, by the accident of his own special experience, the novelist, in some of his novels, of men who pass much of their lives at sea; but the sea, itself, he loved only with defeating qualifications.

Conrad possessed the convivial qualities to an uncommon degree. Without being in the least a snob, he had a proper regard for social prestige, and his own manners were those of an aristocrat. His breeding and his courtesy impressed everybody, and he had the bearing of a *grand seigneur*. Coming of a good Polish family, with long traditions, Conrad could have met anybody as an equal and always displayed an air of distinction. Above all, he shone in congenial company: later might come exhaustion, but for the moment it exhilarated him. Moreover, he had an instinct for saying the right thing, and that created around him an harmonious atmosphere. Conrad seemed to act as a solvent upon the angularities of his different guests: in his presence they talked more readily to one another. His was a humanizing influence, and his very faults made him the more lovable. He was precisely the reverse of those people whose devotion to humanity in general appears to show itself in spitefulness towards individuals. As a matter of fact, for humanity in general Conrad had a good deal of contempt; it was for individuals that he reserved his affection.

He had a sympathetic personality in that double

meaning of the word which one so seldom finds. That is to say, he not only had the kind of personality which attracted people instinctively, but he had the kind of personality which wanted to be of help to those he cared for. His tolerance was not a mere desire to escape trouble, as the apparent tolerance of so many people is, but a real sympathy. Problems of conduct did not leave him indifferent, but he judged them from wise standards and made infinite allowances. The very violence of his occasional antipathies emphasized, indeed, the general tolerance of his mind. It was certainly possible to get on the wrong side of Conrad, but it was easier to awaken his charity and to arouse his interest. A tale of sorrow or injustice was sure of his attention, and he was never more sardonic than in his denunciation of mean acts and lying protestations.

Conrad's life and fortunes had undergone such manifold changes that the past may well have come back to him in a visionary aspect, enamelling his mind with that something dreamlike which so often impressed his companions. As a child he had followed his father into Russian exile; as a boy he had been ceremoniously introduced to the Emperor Francis Joseph in private audience at the Hofburg in Vienna; as a youth he had fought a duel in Marseilles—he carried to his death the scar of the bullet wound in his chest; as a young man he had sailed up the dark and dangerous rivers of Borneo and the Congo and been wrecked in a burning ship; as a man

of early middle age he had taken to literature (after losing the whole of his uncle's small inheritance in a gold-mining speculation) and stuck to it through years of privation; and as an old man he had become famous in two continents and had even—sure sign of official recognition—been offered a knighthood at the end.

I imagine, indeed, that as he looked back upon his career it must have appeared to him as though he had lived several different lives. Certainly, in his reminiscent reveries he frequently spoke as though his listener had been present with him in those far-off days and could appreciate to the full the references of his narrative. It heightened for one the feeling that, though Conrad was alive, he was yet a legendary figure. Is it surprising that one was sometimes inclined to rub one's eyes, as if one feared one might awake and find one's self alone?

And finally, let me say this: unless I have suggested to the reader the sense of a recondite riddle in Conrad's personality, I have failed utterly to convey a true impression of the man. I do not suppose that he understood himself, and I am quite certain that nobody else understood him. Deep within him, in the ferment of his consciousness, there lay an inappeasable melancholy and dissatisfaction. It was the price he had to pay for his genius.

### III

#### CONRAD'S TALK

THERE can have been few finer talkers than Conrad. He had that rarest of things, a mind that was both sane and creative, and his conversation ranged over a great variety of subjects with so keen a perception and brilliant a fancy that to listen to him was a perpetual exhilaration. He was, indeed, a fascinating talker, profound, informed, with modulations in his voice and changing gleams in his eyes that were like the very mirror of his soul.

And behind everything, of course, was his amazing personality, a personality which seemed to add significance to his words and to give to even his chance remarks a new kind of value. To be in his company was to feel the subtler possibilities of language. It was as if while he was speaking one was conscious of another rhythm, that, when he stopped, vibrated still upon the inward ear. There are people who say all the correct things and exhaust one, for they themselves are mere sounding boards, but Conrad's talk was always enthralling because Conrad's personality gave it an everlasting freshness.

The very wealth of my remembrance makes it diffi-



cult for me to recover the tone and quality of that talk. It is not those who knew a man best who are best able to describe him; it is not those who have heard another speak a thousand times who are best able to remember individual conversations. When I sit silent in my room and close my eyes, Conrad appears before me in the actual hue of life: I watch his movements, I hear his speech. But that picture, so real to me in the recollection of my friend, is made up of innumerable details and nuances, and as I try to put it down in words it seems to melt away into a wordless region. Like those thrilling visions that come to us in dreams, the essence is not to be caught in language. And yet the memory of Conrad stays with me unwithered, and if I could only evoke his presence for others his voice would surely be audible once again.

And that would probably do more than anything else to make people see Conrad as he truly was, for it is in the private utterances of public characters that the personality is really revealed. It was, indeed, a great joy to listen to Conrad. Something of his wisdom and charm penetrated his every word and put the seal of a grave eloquence upon his midnight soliloquies. Above all, one felt his genius—and if he had never penned a line one would have felt it just the same. I know that that kind of thing is easy to say, but I believe that one would only have had to listen to him to know that one was in the presence of a very great man. The power of his written

dialogue dwelt there in his talk. It was as if one had suddenly touched upon the secret spring behind his creation.

Not that Conrad talked for effect. He just talked as one friend to another, considerate of other opinions and quick to appreciate a contrary point of view. Nor did he lead conversation into channels that appealed to him unless he saw that they appealed to his listener also. On the contrary, he always tried to talk to people on their own subjects. I have heard him speak to his gardener about gardening. I have heard him speak to his chauffeur about the mechanics of motor cars. I have heard him speak to a villager about local affairs, and he was completely at home in conversations of that sort. That is to say, he discussed all such matters with that sense of bowing to superior knowledge which put him at once on a proper level with his hearers. Everybody with whom Conrad talked found him companionable, for there was no air of deigning about him and no air of boredom. He had an inquiring mind and liked to know how things were done; he had an interest in affairs and liked to know what was going on. There never was a man who was less of a mental recluse or less attached to the ideas of any clique.

With children, in particular, he immediately got on level terms. He was confidential with them, he knew how to draw them out, and in the result they prattled away to him without any kind of self-consciousness. It

was delightful to watch Conrad with children. Not only did he treat them as equals, but he would league himself with them against their elders and create a common bond out of his sense of fun. Some of his letters to children have been published, and they are, in effect, very like what his talks with children were.

Which leads me to say that all Conrad's letters possess an affinity to his talk. When I read a letter of his I not only gauge the exact mood in which it was written, but I judge the very tone he would have used if he had spoken these words. The intimate friendliness is reproduced exactly, as also are the pensive moments of memory and those piercing asides or irritable outbursts which were so typical of the man. There is no need for me to discuss his letters, for many of them have already been made public, but I will say this: that those who study them will catch unaware the veritable echo of Conrad's voice.

In the last chapter I tried to explain how Conrad affected one as having a mind composed of a series of distinct and different levels, and of course it was in his talk that one was made most aware of this. One would begin to speak to Conrad on some subject, some ordinary subject, and he would answer one just like any other intelligent man. Then perhaps something one said would awake a recollection or strike a special note, and suddenly, almost in the middle of a sentence, his whole manner would change and he would have taken a leap

into another plane or layer of thought. There was no warning; it happened instantaneously. I have seen a touch of ironic contempt creep into a conversation that began in an artless way, and a meditative strain evolve from a fortuitous aside. Indeed, without intuition one never quite knew where one was with Conrad or appreciated how deceptive might be his simplest mood. Sometimes when he was annoyed he could be amusingly fractious. When, in an argument to do with facts, you had completely cornered him and proved him incorrect, even then he was by no means disconcerted. "Well, all right, then I'm wrong!" he would exclaim, ending up his remarks with a little humming tune in such a manner as to make you feel that it was you who had put your foot in it. This is a trifle, but it gives an idea of the complexity of Conrad's nature, and it also suggests that something childlike in his character which was at once so engaging and so unexpected. In certain nervous moods he was admittedly unreasonable, but he himself was most generous towards the unreasonable behaviour of others.

To hear Conrad talk at his best one had really to be alone with him in the evening. The finest hours began about ten o'clock, when Russian tea had been brought in and he was left with a single companion. Then, indeed, he seemed to expand in confidences, and one caught a glimpse of the true workings of his brain. One had a strange sensation that the inner man was emerging

and that what he said then was the echo of his deepest cogitations. And occasionally late at night, when I had been sitting with him for a long time, perhaps in silence—for he was given to brooding silences—he would fall into a low-toned reverie of the past. At such times he spoke with a dreamy softness, as if, in the intensity of the vision, he was talking to himself aloud. And who knows but that he was! For these fragmentary reminiscences, captivating in their glimpses of how his books arose, appeared to have no clear beginning or end. They were evidently called forth by some wandering thought and had nothing to do with his immediate surroundings. Nothing at all. An injudicious interruption was quite likely to put an end to them, and one learned almost to hold one's breath lest the flow should be interrupted and the iridescent phantom shattered.

He would stop all at once, and in the supervening silence his absent expression and the nods of his head showed that he was following up the ramifications of his memory yet further. And suddenly he would make a kind of gesture of dismissal. "Isn't it time we were going to bed?" he would say, and one could almost hear his thought click back into the present.

But though Conrad did on occasion indulge in monologues, yet as a general rule his conversation was just as much a matter of listening as of talking. He enjoyed the give and take of minds, and he was far too courteous and sensible a man to regard speech as a monopoly.



There was never a better listener than Conrad, never anyone who more appreciated the fact that social intercourse is a friendly exchange. He did not purposely hold the field, he held it by reason of his peculiar gifts.

If evening was the time for Conrad's most confidential talks, morning was often the time when he was in an almost boisterous humour—a side of him which few readers of his books would suspect. I find it quite beyond me to reproduce his talk at the breakfast table. It was like a bubbling stream of nonsense, in which each extravagance led to another and in which the ludicrous aspect of things held complete sway. The very food upon the table would be the subject of whimsical discourse, and he would discuss the dishes with far-fetched imagery. There is nothing with which I can compare it. Conrad's humour was admittedly not altogether English—that, perhaps, is why many people deny humour to his writings, although his bewildered stewards and such like are surely intensely humorous—but it was extremely infectious. One could not help joining in his peals of laughter, one could not but feel irresponsibly gay, though the elflike grotesqueness of the proceedings was apt to leave one rather at a loss.

And yet to me there was, now and then, something almost painful about these wild bouts of fun. It was as if they had been consciously fomented as a momentary anodyne of forgetfulness. He had a strong sense of the bizarre, and he purposely let it run away with his



talk when his mind was relaxed. But it was just like driving foam upon his thoughts, and one always knew that at any instant it might be blown away. But of course one was glad to see the day open in this manner, because it meant, among other things, that he had not had worrying business letters by the morning's post.

And while I am on this lighter side of Conrad's talk I might refer to his interest in current local gossip. He did not hold himself aloof from anything to do with life, but seemed to find, indeed, psychological hints in the smallest trifles. Conrad invariably displayed much inside knowledge on what was happening in his wide circle and he liked to hear and to impart the latest news. It was not done in a small-minded way; it merely expressed his curiosity about mankind and a something personal about his attitude to the world. He had a pictorial, graphic way of describing people and their foibles, using, ever and again, a French phrase as emphasis, such as *très chic*; *homme du monde*; *comme il faut*. A visit to Conrad was always enlivened by these reminiscences and sallies, and he was exceptionally quick to hit upon and reproduce the characteristics of the people with whom he came in contact.

And when he told, as he sometimes did tell, a tale of comedy or terror, then, indeed, the atmosphere was created before one's eyes. The sentences mounted one upon another to a climax, with inflections of tone and sudden pauses, until the sheer illusion was there and a

sense of drama tingled about one. It was not only the past that he recovered, it was also the spirit of the past, the very emotions which the past had thrown upon him. There are many novelists whose writing life is a product of solitude, but Conrad's writing life was the life that he had lived, the emanation of his own personality and adventures. Had he belonged to some Eastern race, who crowd round story-tellers in the dusk, he would have been the most famous figure of his generation.

Conrad had a fund of shrewdness gathered from long contact with his fellows. I remember him telling me, in that final way of his, how much safer it was for a woman to be married to a roué than to an idealist. The roué might often be unfaithful, but he would always return, whereas the idealist, by very virtue of his idealism, would go off for ever if he ever did go off. He frequently flashed out observations of this kind. And he was wonderfully quick to see the counter arguments to accepted truisms. Someone kept insisting to him once that a certain fanatic had, at any rate, complete honesty of purpose. "The value of honesty," said Conrad, "depends on what you are honest about." Again, I once remarked to him that dogs showed folly in their subservience to human beings. "You might just as well argue that they showed wisdom," replied Conrad. "If they believe that men are at the top of the scale, isn't it reasonable to wish to be with them?"

But after all, the casual sentences which one happens

to remember are almost more misleading than revealing. It was in his long conversations—those things impossible to recapture—that Conrad showed the shrewdness of his mind. One always felt in talking to him that he had had so much experience of the world and had looked upon it with so clear an eye that he was not to be taken in by any of the ordinary shams. I remember his contempt when, at the beginning of the war, we all put so much faith in Russia. He told me over and over again that Russia would let England down for a certainty, and that the “steam roller” about which everyone was so confident was utter nonsense. For, like most men upon whom sentiment acts deeply, Conrad had contempt for emotional sentimentalism. He knew the facile capacity of people for believing what they want to believe, and all his life he endeavoured to look things squarely in the face. There was no one better able to tear away the mask and to make one perceive the cold reality of a situation.

A sort of fatalism seemed often to hover over Conrad's conversation, though rather by implication than by bald statement. In the midst of an argument with him one would at times be conscious of an underlying melancholy, as though, when all was said and done, he would have summed up existence in the words used by Anatole France—words, indeed, which I have heard Conrad often quote—“They were born, they suffered, they died.” He was frequently, as I have said, very si-

lent, sitting huddled up, his head half buried in his shoulders as if in utter lassitude of brain and body, but the play of his features and the incessant movement of his hands and feet showed that his mind was alert and his memory ranging over the years.

But, again, he could be quite different. When, for instance, he presided at the head of his table with his friends around him, he seemed to grow happier in their congenial company. The clouds fell away from him, and he would emerge brighter, fresher, with all the youthfulness of his heart undimmed. Conrad was never finer than at such moments. His warmth embraced everyone in the room and radiated into its farthest corners. Those Sunday luncheons of his, when the guests were of his own choosing, saw him expand like some rich tropical flower. There was no question then of escape—as one felt in his bizarre humour—it was real happiness in the companionship of the friends he cared for.

Yes, the position of a host at the head of his own table before a large and kindred gathering and the position of a friend in a tête-à-tête conversation late at night in front of a dwindling fire saw Conrad at his best. They reflected two facets of his character; they bore witness in public and in private to his astonishingly varied gifts as a talker.

I ought to have taken notes of the more memorable conversations I had with him and the more remarkable things I heard him say in public, but I suppose that if

I had they would not really have helped me very much in my aim. To repeat his actual words would not necessarily be to cage that peerless spirit. Conrad's greatness as a personality is, indeed, an incommunicable memory.

And yet, if he was particularly charming in his own house, he was equally charming, although from rather a different angle, when he was away from home. When he came to London for the day, which he frequently did in order to see his literary agent, he nearly always got in touch with me. Our usual meeting place was the Royal Automobile Club, which, as one might have expected, he much preferred to his other more sedate club, the Athenæum. Here is a typical note appointing such a meeting:

I am certain to be [at] R.A.C. a little after 12 noon and if you can spare the time for a social drink it would be nice.

He loved to meet a friend or two there about midday and have a drink and a chat before lunch. How many times have I sat with him for half-an-hour or so in the lounge there, and how many times, too, have I lunched and dined with him in London. And sometimes I would induce him to lunch or dine with me to meet friends of mine. On such occasions he talked with a peculiar affability and was always in the best of form. One knew, of course, the type of person he would wish to meet, and one was careful not to make a mistake. He would often say to me afterwards, "I liked So-and-so: he's a good fellow," and I think that he took a real pleasure in these momen-



tary contacts with other minds. I never asked people to meet him simply because they were famous or intellectual; I asked people to meet him who I knew would appreciate him personally: these were the people he got on with.

And I invariably found that two things, above all, affected strangers about Conrad—his tremendous personality and his unself-conscious modesty. I have, I admit, known people who thought Conrad was overbearing, but that was simply a question of their getting on his nerves. In all his talks with those he liked there was never the slightest hint of self-glorification, and he was quite unaware of the powerful charm which his own individuality exercised. He has said to me, when I have been sitting with him, “Don’t you find it terribly boring to be here all alone with me?”—Yes, he has actually said that. And it was not said with the idea of being contradicted, it was said because the thought had definitely presented itself to him. Conrad never fished for compliments, even in regard to friendship—never by any chance. He wanted to be one of the company in which he found himself, he did not want to stand out above the company.

The mere sound of his voice gladdened one, as, on arrival at his house, one heard the hearty call of welcome from his study, “Well, my dear fellow, and how are you?” And often the door would be flung open and Conrad would appear smiling in the doorway. And often



indeed, as I have mentioned before, he was already in the hall as one entered it. "Come in here as soon as you have taken off your coat." Once in his study all was kindness and amity. "Let me look at you. I know what you want—a drink!" And he would press the button three times, which was the prearranged signal. Never were there such receptions before, never will there be such receptions again.

It was, in fact, this note of open-hearted friendship which made much of his talk so singularly delightful. The glow of his playful affection surrounded one, as it were, and there was no one who could buttonhole a companion with the same familiar ease. Without meaning to flatter, Conrad was the master of the most invincible flattery. He made one feel one's importance to him—and that is a feeling we all enjoy. Both in his talk and in his letters he put one in the very forefront and treated one quite naturally as though one were his closest confidant. I remember that when he wrote to tell me that he had just finished correcting the proofs of the Author's Note for *Notes on Life and Letters*, he added:

You were very vividly with me—your friendship, your kindness, your personality, and I missed more than ever your voice, your characteristic turn of conversation, the downrightness of your mind and the warm genuineness of your feelings.

I quote these sentences, not because they are gracious to myself—to all his real intimates he was constantly

writing just such remarks—but because they are absolutely typical of his conversation in a certain mood. He would say the very things that pleased one, for in his expression of friendship there was an invariable felicity which made one purr like a cat having its back stroked.

To the end of his life Conrad spoke with a marked foreign accent, and there were certain words—Salisbury, for instance, which he called Sal-is-bury—that he never learned to pronounce correctly. This was the more curious in that his French pronunciation, as a Frenchman has assured me, was perfect. But then, of course, he learned English at a maturer age. Strangers, recollecting his mastery of the written language, were astonished at this, but those who knew him soon forgot all about it. The accent did not sound incongruous to them, partly, no doubt, through habit, but partly, I conjecture, because Conrad himself was so astounding that nothing could really have surprised them. He often, as I have said, interlarded his conversation with French, but he kept his Polish entirely for correspondence.

Conrad had a way of coming out with some remark after a silence that had nothing whatever to do with the range of the previous talk. As if dredged up from the well of his thoughts, emerged some question or some observation which gave one a sense of having caught for a second a hint of what was passing in his deeper mind. I remember to this day how taken aback I was when he asked me suddenly, “What do you think of Mussolini?”

—a name never, within my recollection, mentioned by him before. Indeed, I am certain that a succession of problems kept presenting themselves to Conrad's brain, and that many of these problems were never mentioned to any one. That undoubtedly was one of the things which made him so mysterious a companion, even when he was most communicative.

And another thing which made him mysterious was the knowledge that this man, who might be talking to one about some trivial matter, possessed so marvellous a creative mind. One never forgot that, and the simpler his conversation, the more exciting was the thought. I always had a sneaking sympathy for the visitor from overseas who came to call on him one day and continued to repeat, between tense pauses, "But how *did* you think of the plot of *Chance*?" It amused Conrad to tell this story, though I suspect he was irritated at the time: but, after all, how *did* he? How did he breathe life into all those people and conjure up the mighty atmosphere of his settings?

While Conrad talked he smoked innumerable cigarettes—latterly he smoked only French cigarettes because he said that they did not affect his throat—and often he would throw them aside after a few puffs. He lived so much in his own thoughts that in a gesture like this, accompanied as it would usually be by a change of expression, one could almost trace the mole run of an idea. And then one waited in expectation to see what he

would say next, to watch the mole peep forth for an instant on the surface. He discussed, as I have said before, all manner of things—politics, art, history—and his views were at once original and profound. He was never commonplace even when he was most orthodox: he could maintain the views of the crowd by arguments that the crowd had never dreamed of. He brought to bear a constructive mind upon the very problems of the hour, and he touched dusty polemical questions with imaginative ardour.

And another thing he would discuss with subtlety was the psychology and relationship of men and women. One must appreciate that Conrad did not have altogether an English point of view and that his special romanticism was more prepared to face facts than is always evident in the Anglo-Saxon. Conrad was never shocked, but he had a natural sensitiveness and delicacy which show clearly in the texture of his books. I have heard people say that Conrad did not understand women, and that his woman characters are unconvincing, but I sometimes think the truth is that the people who make such remarks do not themselves understand Conrad's attitude to women. It is true that many of his woman characters are, as it were, different echoes of an ideal woman brought to life by his genius—a memory, no doubt, of the Doña Rita of his youth—but when he spoke of women he showed a very exact insight (as it seemed to me) into their general characteristics. He was

not a feminist—he said in *Nostromo*, “a woman with a masculine mind is not a being of superior efficiency; she is simply a phenomenon of imperfect differentiation—interestingly barren and without importance”—but he admired intensely certain feminine qualities. As he wrote to me once:

You know how I prize women’s appreciation, which, for a man not specializing in sentiment, is about the greatest reward one’s sincerity can obtain.

In a sense Conrad regarded women in a material light, and yet beyond all that there was, as I have said, his ideal conception—a conception which, I believe, was always with him and coloured his creative mind. He had no Victorian illusions about women. But he had perhaps a Polish illusion about them—if there is such a special thing—or perhaps it was simply his own particular standpoint. Conrad was very popular with women, but he was not very confidential with them. And that again showed his foreign attitude. He treated women, in short, more as a courteous Frenchman would treat them than as a sentimental Englishman. But at the same time he was capable, as his books prove, of a mental passion for a woman which few sentimental Englishmen could achieve.

Conrad had as many moods in his talk as he had in himself. His every turn of phrase and outward mannerism is indelibly fixed upon my memory, but how can I clothe for others that mental image with the substance



of life? I wish I had magic words in which to convey my own impression of Conrad, words that would make everything clear, but that is the vainest of wishes. The inflection and the fancy, the luminous flights, the tones of scorn and tenderness—none of these things can I truly catch.

And how can I capture even the sense of his presence, with its cordiality and its air of proud distinction? He was never mannered; his thought was the natural outpouring of his mind. And what a mind it was! How it rang out against sophistries and ignorance! I have often felt, as I listened to Conrad, that here was the real truth, unaffected by fashions, the same from age to age. For when he dealt with basic questions he was totally unconcerned with ephemeral valuations. He judged things, as one might put it, from an absolute standard, and was almost less carried away by crowd psychology than anybody I have known.

I do not mean to imply by this that he was always right, but simply that he had for great subjects a great outlook. He had an interest in general ideas and a philosophic detachment from the cries of the moment. But with it all he was extremely personal in his attitude and was frequently swayed by considerations which were difficult to follow. Here again I am up against the riddle: the more I try to pin Conrad down, the more I find myself merely walking round him. But his conversation was a true index of himself, and all its different



shades were, each of them, a reflection of the man. For though Conrad was, in a way, very obscure, nevertheless he was very genuine. He never talked purposely to deceive, and of him it could not be said that words were given him to conceal his thoughts. Certainly he did not tell all he was thinking, and certainly one was quite liable to misapprehend his real ideas, but that was another matter altogether, depending upon the complex nature of his character. One might wonder what Conrad's final opinions were, but one never doubted that his words, whatever bias they took, were invariably the completely sincere expression of his mood.

## IV

### HOW CONRAD WORKED

CONRAD always declared that he had no facility at all for writing and that he had to force every word out of himself. It was a mystery to him how anybody could work easily, and I remember his telling me, when we were discussing the output of some authors, with what astonishment he had seen a man he knew go into the corner of a room full of talking people and write several thousand words straight off without a pause. That kind of achievement was beyond his comprehension; but then, if one comes to think of it, Conrad's achievement was probably beyond the comprehension of the man in the corner. In his later years Conrad considered 350 words a day a fair average output, and it must be noted that this was for a working day and that sometimes for weeks together illness or worry made him unable to put pen to paper.

When he lived at Oswalds he seldom wrote or dictated save in the morning, but when he *was* at work he would shut himself up alone with his secretary and apply himself to his task with the rigour of a hermit at his devotions. He was not particularly anxious to begin, but once he had begun he was inaccessible. "Now, Dick,

you had better go off and amuse yourself for a time: I'm going to work," he would say, and I knew then that I must disappear until about lunch time. I was always glad when he made such a remark, because it showed, not only that he was relatively well, but that with me he had got past the ceremonious stage. His courtesy, in the ordinary way, would have been shocked at the thought of showing indifference to the entertainment of a guest, and he would even warn me beforehand that he meant to work during a proposed visit. I remember his writing to me in May, 1922:

I have been working a bit lately and will not "cut the vein" on account of your visit.

Conrad's health was so precarious that he treasured it and would not, if possible, let anything interrupt the mood and steal from him the chance of covering another lap. Every day of health was a day gained.

He had first, I believe, tried dictating when he was writing *Nostromo*, but it was only in the last five years of his life that he took to it as a regular habit. During all that time his secretary, Miss Hallowes, lived in the house, and he had come to find in dictation a great and even necessary relief from the physical disability of gout in his wrist. He would sit in his big armchair facing the window in his study, and leaning over toward the table would dictate slowly, with long pauses. Many legends have gathered around Conrad, but perhaps none was

wider of the mark than that which describes him as walking up and down a little covered path, reminiscent of a quarterdeck, in the short interludes of work. Conrad's mind required a state of physical quietude and ease for creation. He was so readily tired that even the mildest exertion would have prevented him working at all.

Sometimes he actually wrote and dictated at the same time. I am not sure whether he did this with the first draft or only in the revision, but, at any rate, it proves how slowly the work advanced. The idea probably was to give him the visual sense of what he was doing while enabling him to have the benefit of that clear contemplation which comes from dictating. It was only towards the end that he began this double method, and I dare say he would soon have abandoned it. Conrad was fond of experiments. But he may, indeed, have found in it that kind of simple, automatic activity which for some writers seems to clarify the mind in the pauses of creation. At one period Conrad had the habit of drawing human figures on stray pieces of paper or the margins of his manuscripts, and I know that when he was engaged on any task requiring concentration he would every now and then break off to discuss something quite trivial, probably an object that had caught his eye, while all the time he was gathering energy for another bound.

Conrad did an enormous amount of rewriting. Page after page of his typescripts has the appearance of original manuscript, just as page after page of his proof

sheets resembles a battlefield. He told me that he minded very little what form his books took in serialization; and, in fact, some of his most severe rewriting was actually done when the book had already appeared in print. One has only to compare, for instance, the text of *Nostromo* as printed in *T. P.'s Weekly* and as a book, and the text of *The Rescue* as printed in *Land and Water* and as a book, to appreciate to what a degree Conrad was in the habit of altering his work. I doubt, indeed, whether any author's work shows more variations than does that of Conrad. If a student were to collate it he would find that some of it is extant in at least six different states—the manuscript, the corrected typescript, the serial form, the American book form, the English book form, and the collected edition book form. It was the last alone that Conrad considered his final text.

In his earlier years, when his strength was greater and his memories, perhaps, more resurgent, Conrad would write not only throughout the day but even far into the night. He would write, indeed, until the world about him vanished and he was living intensely in his own created world. And yet, even in those days, when he lost count of time and place, his work was always a frightful toil. The effort to make his full vision materialize tortured him unceasingly. I do not suppose that he ever felt completely satisfied. He would write and rewrite, he would cut down ruthlessly, he would put one

story aside and begin another, but his tenacity always triumphed in the long run. Once Conrad had his mind really fixed upon a subject nothing made him let go. His resolution was unconquerable, and however slowly he might advance, however often he might halt, in the end he accomplished what he had set out to accomplish. And now and again, in a flood tide of memory, he would get through an enormous amount of work with exceptional rapidity. He told me, for instance, that he had written the whole of "Heart of Darkness," which is 40,000 words long, in a month; and that certainly was a feat.

Such a feat, however, would have been beyond him in his later years. He had periods then in which all ideas seemed to forsake him, and even when he was well he had to husband his reserves and content himself with short spells. With the goal plain before him he had to struggle forward by allotting himself a daily task of a few hours.

People have accused Conrad—people who knew little about him, I admit—of being lazy. But such talk is pathetically beside the point. His whole life was in his work, and even when he was too tired or ill to write his mind was constantly hovering about it and his imagination constantly alert. Here is a quotation from one of his letters to me:

I have been doing nothing but thinking—absorbing myself in constant meditation—over the novel. It's almost there! Almost to be grasped. Almost ready to flow over on the paper—but not quite yet.



When he was writing a book he was always gazing at it as a chess master gazes at the board before him in a complicated game. The permutations and the combinations were examined one by one, and in his long silences I am sure that he heard the recurrent voices of his characters. I have been Conrad's guest through all the stages of a book's career, and I know very well that, if his actual writing hours were few, the hours in which he pondered were practically the hours of his waking life. Indeed, when he had got into his stride he would on occasion throw his own rule to the winds and work in the afternoon as well as in the morning. Less than a year before his death he wrote to me:

I am sure you will be fraternally pleased that I have this moment—4.20 P.M.—finished my “Geographical” introduction, the light of day dying out of the window as line succeeded line on the last page.

And as to proof correcting, he certainly worked at that whenever the mood took him. And proof correcting with Conrad was a very serious matter. He took, for instance, nearly six weeks over the revision in proof of *Victory*, and the proof sheets of *The Rescue*, which he presented to me, must contain thousands of corrections. They are a sight to distract a printer and to delight a collector. But Conrad, as I say, was ready to tackle proofs at any hour. Indeed, to the close of his life he seemed at times able to vanquish fatigue and could astonish his friends by his stamina.

And Conrad not only lived with the figures of the book he was writing, he lived perpetually with his as yet unborn creations. Shadowy figures moved incessantly on the horizon of his mind, and situations were dimly taking shape. He could not invent subjects, he said; they came to him. And he did not know when they would come to him. I remember that once, when he had announced to me that he had got an idea for a story I asked him how he had got it. "It suddenly flashed upon me in the middle of the night," he answered. Yes, that was the way it happened: all at once, for no particular reason, some reminiscence of the olden time would arise and he would look at it and judge it to be good. Sometimes it would be an incident that he had not thought of for years, and sometimes, as I mention elsewhere, it would be suggested to him by the novel he was then writing.

He never kept any notes, and even his Congo diary, which gives so many hints for "Heart of Darkness," survived only by chance and was, as I gather from Mrs. Conrad (who told me she had retrieved it from the waste-paper basket), never consulted by Conrad when writing that story. In his adventurous days he had no thought of becoming an author, but even if he had had such a thought he was not the kind of man to make jottings. Everything essential was already impressed upon that marvellous memory, and he would have hated the precision of exact dates and meticulous rem-

iniscence. Conrad had the discriminating memory of an artist: he was concerned with a fundamental and not a photographic reality.

Let me give an example of what I mean. He told me once the name of the island where the crew of the burning ship in "Youth" landed, that island which showed him first the face of the East and was the origin of one of his most celebrated passages of description. I mentioned its name in an article about Conrad's voyages which I was writing, but on sending the proof to him he asked me to remove it. And this was his reason:

In "Youth," in which East or West are of no importance whatever, I kept the name of the Port of landing out of the record of "poeticised" sensations. The paragraph you quote of the East meeting the narrator is all right in itself; whereas directly it's connected with —— it becomes nothing at all. —— is a damned hole without any beach and without any glamour, and in relation to the paragraph is not in tone. Therefore the paragraph when pinned to a particular spot must appear diminished—a fake. And yet it is true!

There you see his idea. For the name to be known would have localized the emotions of the narrator and have lessened the epic quality of the romance. All the glamour would have been rubbed away and the experience itself would have lost its universal significance. He wanted to give to this first glimpse of the East the very tone of his mind, and he could succeed in doing that only by keeping the exact spot purposely vague. As he wrote to me elsewhere in that same letter:



To Richard Conle  
—  
sup. Conrad 1914

Conrad in 1914





Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion. . . . Nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement, and also its power to call the attention away from things that matter in the region of art.

Conrad, though he detested labels, could equally have been called a realist or a romantic. Indeed, he was both: his artistic judgment kept a just balance between the two, and that is one of the reasons why his work does not seem to age.

He was, however, extremely careful to make his historical backgrounds correct. He even, I believe, read at the British Museum for the purposes of one of his books, and he never wrote of a country about which he did not have some kind of genuine knowledge. Conrad, it must be remembered, was not an amateur. What he did he did thoroughly, but when it came to the facts of his own life, which he used so freely for the purposes of his fiction, then he felt at liberty to choose exactly what he liked and to colour the past as he saw fit.

But it is curious how closely he sometimes did hold to the facts. When he first began to write it never occurred to him that any of his old associates would see his books, and he used time and again the very names of the people he had known and of the ships he had sailed in. He told me a story of how his old captain in the *Vidar*, hurrying across London one day to the East India Docks, was suddenly startled beyond words



by seeing in a bookseller's window a novel with the title *Almayer's Folly*. For in one of those Borneo creeks up which the *Vidar* sailed there *was* an Almayer, and his house *was* called Almayer's Folly.

But actually his Eastern associates did, earlier than Conrad supposed, begin to speculate upon the authorship of these books that revealed so deep an inside knowledge of their mode of life. I sometimes heard Conrad repeat the story—and he never lost his air of surprise in repeating it—of how some prescient person in Singapore or thereabouts had remarked, "It must be that mate who used to be with Craig in the *Vidar*." And latterly, when he was very famous, various of his old shipmates got into touch with him. He would remark to me, "I had a letter last week from a man in Liverpool who sailed with me in the ———: I remember him quite well." Such letters pleased Conrad: they brought back his old life and he was glad to think that he had not been forgotten by his associates of other days.

Certain mental pictures haunted Conrad. Above all, he was obsessed by the opening scene of an unwritten novel that was to have its setting in some Eastern European state. So vividly used he to describe this scene to me that at last it was as though I had been a witness to it myself. In the courtyard of a royal palace, brilliantly lighted up as for a festival, soldiers are bivouacked in the snow. And inside the palace a fateful

council is taking place and the destiny of the country is being decided. I never learned anything more about this novel—I do not know how far Conrad had himself visualized the plot—but as he pictured that opening scene one could almost feel the tension in the air and one almost seemed to be warming one's hands with the soldiers around their blazing fire.

Conrad's mind was for ever probing and searching, for ever waiting for an inspiration. He had various books up his sleeve, so to speak, and I remember how delighted he was when he hit upon the title of *Tales of Hearsay* for a volume of short stories. He had every intention of making use of this title one of these days, and I think, therefore, that I was justified in giving it to his posthumous volume of tales, although his *Tales of Hearsay* would have been, in parts at least, a quite different volume.

And yet, if I have heard him once say, "I can't think of a subject," I have heard him say it a dozen times. It was, indeed, his tragedy that conscious thought was of little assistance to him in this respect, and that something else had to stir within his mind before the plot revealed itself. He possessed no glib inventive faculty, and he was for ever tormented by the fear that he would be deserted altogether by ideas and by the very power to create. When he was writing a novel he felt himself entangled in a mesh, and he never knew whether he would have sufficient energy to tear himself free. Over

and over again he has discussed this fear with me. I always did my best to persuade him that it was groundless, but I am not certain that my assurances had much weight with him. "Yes, I know that so far I have been able to bring it off, but will I be able to this time?" That was the way he argued. He felt that he was losing his grip, that virtue, figuratively, was going out of him, and he was feverishly anxious to overcome his own doubts and to gain another victory against odds. The title of his unfinished novel, *Suspense*, was, indeed, double edged. He lived, himself, in a state of suspense about this novel, and the way it dragged itself out for years was ominously suggestive.

Conrad used sometimes to say that *Suspense* would be his last novel. But I do not believe that he would ever have stopped writing. His work mastered him, and he was driven on and on in spite of himself. The misty schemes would assuredly have taken shape had he lived a few years more. The toil of writing was anguish to him, but the desire to create was an irresistible instinct, and he would never have given up the battle. Never, under any circumstances: of that I am certain. But my impression is, from what he used to tell me, that his mind was reverting more and more to the memories of his earliest days and that reminiscence pure and simple was what he now most wished to write. However, as I have already pointed out, Conrad's moods were

incalculable, and it is utterly impossible to dogmatize as to what the future might have brought forth.

For it was not only in one respect that his work mastered him, it was in every respect. He could not tell what subject would come uppermost, and he could not tell how he would treat it when it did arrive. The whole texture of his work kept changing imperceptibly and he did not know where it was leading him. As long ago as March, 1913, he wrote to me:

I am feeling very flat. My manner is evolving into something new to which I am not used. The work in such conditions comes with difficulty and the doubt as to its value is worrying.

Yes, it is perfectly true to say that, just as he had to wait for inspiration for his subjects, so his style and treatment of these subjects were themselves largely beyond his control. I have noted—for what it is worth—seven distinct periods in his work, and though these periods might seem arbitrary to some critics, nevertheless it is obvious that there is an enormous amount of difference between, let us say, his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, and his last completed novel, *The Rover*, and that that difference must have been progressive. His attitude to art did not alter, but the expression of his attitude altered profoundly.

It comes then to this, that we must differentiate between Conrad's self-conscious aims and his unself-

conscious genius. He always had a critical perception of his own work, but he could not always have explained his own mental processes. In fact, I am pretty sure that he was often quite unaware why his manner should have changed or how he had reached his effects. I will give an example of this last. There is a well-known passage in *Chance*, in which the evil governess and her disreputable young man are plotting together in the house of the ruined De Barral, when suddenly the writing bursts into the historic present with thrilling effect.

"What made you think of doing it, Conrad?" I asked.

"Ah, that was a happy chance," he replied—and I believe it simply *was* a happy chance.

And I doubt whether he could have explained how he achieved the gorgeous descriptive passages which, in his earlier books especially, reverberate with the very illusion of music. In truth, he had ceased to care for such passages, but sometimes I used to wonder whether he had ceased to care for them because the inspiration that produced them had, as one might put it, refined itself away.

But though subjects came to Conrad almost without his volition, and though his style evolved imperceptibly, nevertheless one might almost say that he wrote each of his works with a special object in view. And by that I do not refer to any artistic or moral object: I refer precisely to a special and concealed object which differed on



every occasion. Those who read Conrad's own prefaces, and the notes he wrote in my copies of his books, quoted in another chapter, will understand something of what I mean, but only something. For one always felt that Conrad liked to keep his deeper inner reasons to himself and that he was averse from disclosing the whole rounded scheme of his writing life. He did not plan, like Balzac, a cycle of books to cover all human activity, but he did, I think, have a plan of his own which, in its special way, was almost as inclusive. In my chapter about Conrad's personality I quoted from a letter in which, talking about the "sea-stuff" in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *The Mirror of the Sea*, he mentions that it is there because of a "very special purpose," and sometimes I have thought that practically everything he wrote had its own very special purpose. The idea is a suggestive one and might be followed up further.

Conrad wrote a peculiarly beautiful hand—oddly enough, it was much more distinguished and individual in his later years than when he first began to write novels—which varied in size from minute to very large. For private correspondence he much disliked using the means of dictation. Of all his letters to me not more than about a dozen were dictated, and generally speaking he regarded letter writing as a personal obligation about which it would not have been polite to deputize in any sort of degree. I never could understand how he man-



aged to get through so many letters, for I have known the mere fact of having one considerable letter to write bother him for several days. But there, again, his tenacity always triumphed in the long run. I should imagine that there are at least four thousand letters of his preserved to this day. In the introduction to the official *Life and Letters* M. Jean-Aubry states that he has examined not less than two thousand Conrad letters, and there must be, of course, masses which he has not even heard of. In truth, I would not be surprised if the number were largely in excess of four thousand. And this is the more astonishing when we remember that of all the letters he wrote up to 1894 practically none is now known to be in existence.

The fact is that Conrad had, as I mentioned before, a great wish to keep in close touch with his friends, and his letters do therefore possess that personal note which made them prized by their recipients. It was largely this—this, and a prophetic instinct about his coming greatness—that must have caused so many of them to be kept by people who usually destroy correspondence. We are all the gainers: Conrad's letters seem to me among the most remarkable and charming that there are.

Late afternoon was a favourite time with Conrad for writing his letters. He would sit at his flat desk, bent over the paper, and sometimes while he was so engaged he would comment aloud on the letter he was answering.

For if to many people he wrote enchanting letters, some must have received extremely ironical ones. Celebrated men are the inevitable victims of foolish communications and Conrad was not always patient in his replies.

When I first knew Conrad he abhorred the idea of using anything but an ordinary pen, but later on an American admirer presented him with an enormous silver fountain pen in which he came to delight. I was often surprised that he could wield it at all, it was so gigantic, but wield it he did, and ceaselessly. Though he hated the actual task of letter writing, a task which grew upon him with his growing fame, nevertheless he did not attempt to evade it. In fact, I doubt whether he ever wrote more letters than during his last years. Why, even in 1923, when he was in the United States, the centre of an almost national ovation, he continued to keep actively in touch with his friends in England by means of letters written in his own hand.

Although Conrad lived so intensely with his creations, he was usually very secretive about them while they were being built up. And this, I think, was largely due to a self-protective instinct. He did not want to share his exhausting inner life, save occasionally with some trusted friend; he wanted only to share his outer life, wherein lay a chance of rest and recuperation. True, he would write letters about the work he had in hand, letters in abundance, but they were in the nature of blowing off steam and were not really confidential let-

ters. When the day's active work was over he seemed sometimes to emerge out of a kind of dream state and to find momentary shelter from his thoughts in a totally dissimilar mental atmosphere. He sought for a complete contrast, and the inaccessibility of his mind was never more apparent than when he was struggling with a novel. Strangers who saw Conrad in his hours of relaxation could little have guessed the ferment just beneath the surface. But those who knew how even the watches of the night were peopled for him understood that, however care-free his talk might appear, the mind beneath it was wrestling night and day with the problems of his work.

## V

### CONRAD'S ATTITUDE TO HIS OWN BOOKS

IT WAS possible to know Conrad quite well without hearing him discuss his books. For it was only in the right mood and in that sympathetic silence in which his thoughts could expand that he cared to go at all deeply into their structure or to talk about them in detail. In the course of ordinary conversation, when people mentioned his novels or his characters, he would reply with a joking, friendly politeness, but that meant nothing at all; it was only the civil recognition he paid to the enthusiasm of his admirers. And therefore, though plenty of people were curious as to his attitude, few really understood it. It was not that he was vague, it was simply that he did not often care to speak seriously about what was so close to him. There were inner chambers of his mind to which few had access, and even those few found that their access was fragmentary and uncertain. To be absolutely sure of Conrad's meaning was, as I have said before, very difficult, and it was frequently a case of putting two and two together as best one could, and of judging as much by what was left unsaid as by any definite statement.

But it was fascinating to listen to him in his rare expansive moments, for his perceptions were extremely subtle and his creative imagination was always bounded by definite critical aims. Of course, he had preferences, which were not always literary, but he knew quite well what it was he wanted to do, and he knew quite well when he had succeeded and when he had failed. It would have been absurd to ask Conrad outright how he placed his books in relation to one another: he did not construct orders of precedence, and such a question would have seemed to him fatuously inane. Moreover, when Conrad talked about his work he talked, as it were, aloud to himself, and his opinions had the elliptical quality of a monologue.

I am quite aware that people usually regard a novelist's opinions on his own work more as an amusing freak than as a serious contribution to criticism, but if a labourer is worthy of his hire I cannot see why a novelist should not be worthy of a hearing. And, after all, what is serious criticism? There is no such thing as a true science of æsthetics, and even the most abstract criticism comes down to personal predilections. I am not saying that Conrad's views are the last word, I am not saying that he was not governed by influences that the ordinary critic might escape, but I do know that his views about his own books were deeply interesting and that he could throw side lights upon them that nobody else could.

What I want to do here, therefore, is if possible to look at Conrad's work through his own eyes. I want to supplement, so to speak, his prefaces and comments in printed letters, which, being open to all, I need not refer to; I want to give an outline of his intimate opinions, as I gathered them over a long series of years. Conrad was in the habit of writing personal notes in my copies of his books, and these in themselves yield valuable data: but my true sources of information are the innumerable discussions we had together, the intuitive knowledge arrived at from association, and the chance remarks he would let fall out of his overflowing reveries.

Conrad was sensitive to the intelligence of his listeners. An understanding remark would please him extraordinarily, whereas an obtuse remark was quite likely to make him dry up. I remember, for instance, that in a discussion on *The Arrow of Gold* I once said to him that it was not clear to me why Rita finally left Monsieur George. "Oh, well, my dear fellow," he replied, "if you can't understand that, it's not worth discussing it." For Conrad's figures were very real to him and their actions had that kind of inevitability which came from a complete grasp of their characters. So many of the incidents narrated by Conrad actually did happen that his task as a novelist was largely to explain the reasons and to elucidate the intermediate steps.

He was, on the other hand, very ready to argue over technical points and to give reasons for what he had



done. I remember discussing with him whether Verloc, the spy of *The Secret Agent*, would really have used such a word as "hyperborean," and how Conrad agreed that it was doubtful. He had, he told me, argued it out with himself when he was writing this book and had settled at the time that the word was permissible. And I remember also that, when a friend of mine drew attention in an article to the fact that Decoud in *Nostromo* could not possibly have written his enormously long letter in the time at his disposal, Conrad admitted freely (though slightly acidly) that that probably was so, and that it had not occurred to him before. Some people, he said, were always waiting to find one out in mistakes.

Genius is unself-conscious, but art is highly self-conscious—and Conrad was a great artist. He began to write at a mature age, and though, as I have said, his manner changed, his attitude did not really change. The labour which went into his work was invariably of the same almost desperate order, and he never allowed a line to be printed on which he had not expended a vast amount of effort. Thus, though it is true that his preferences arose from various reasons, they could nevertheless always be upheld from a purely literary angle.

For instance, in the two of his books which were dearest to his heart, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *The Mirror of the Sea*, the very sentiment of remembrance that glows within their pages is really evoked

by the splendour of the writing itself. In my copy of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* he wrote:

By these pages I stand or fall.

and in my copy of *The Mirror of the Sea*:

I have a special feeling for these pages. Twenty best years of my life went to the making of them.

He thought that *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* though not his foremost book, was the book which gave him a unique position in the world of letters. He felt that of all his works this was the one which was least likely to have been imagined by anybody else. That book and *The Mirror of the Sea* were his own special children; his affection for them was too personal almost for critical examination. They recovered for him the flavour of his youth and the image of its vanished days.

I suppose most readers of Conrad would put *Lord Jim* first among his works, but certainly Conrad did not put it first. He wrote in my copy:

When I began this story, which some people think my best—personally I don't—I formed the resolve to cram as much character and episode into it as it could hold. This explains its great length, which the tale itself does not justify.

In brief, he thought the book top-heavy, and was by no means pleased at the eulogies it aroused by implied contrast with his other books. But one must remember that the personal equation often coloured Conrad's opinions. If *Lord Jim* had not been a popular book he might

have held a better idea of it; the very fact that it was constantly praised made its faults more obvious to him.

The same may be said of *Chance*. It was his first great success and it is the book with which thousands of latter-day readers came to associate his name. But Conrad did not care for it particularly. He thought that undue emphasis was laid upon it, and this made him more conscious of its failings than of its merits. It is not that Conrad was at heart really biassed against his work by too loud a chorus of approval, but that he was often a prey to irritable reactions and disliked seeing what he thought finer work overlooked in favour of the more obvious.

*Chance* was something of an experiment—he wrote in my copy,

In this book I made an attempt to grapple with characters generally foreign to the body of my work

—and he did not think the subject altogether suited to his particular method of treatment. The book left him rather indifferent.

*Nostromo*, on the other hand, which was long much neglected and has never even now, I think, taken its proper place, he regarded as his principal achievement. No book cost him so much toil, and its failure to win recognition was a bitter disappointment to him. I have little doubt myself that its eclipse was partly due to the involved manner of the narration, in which time at

first seems to reverse itself, but mainly to the bewildering vastness of the canvas. It was through my admiration for *Nostromo*, as I have already said, that I really got acquainted with Conrad, and I know that he was always particularly pleased when any critic or visitor spoke appreciative words about the novel.

This book, [he wrote in my copy] represents two years of work, and he went on to remark that it had been his ambition to render the spirit of an epoch in the history of South America.

A great ambition indeed, greatly achieved, and almost miraculous when one remembers, as I have pointed out previously, that Conrad's whole personal knowledge of South America was derived from a few days spent upon the shores of the Spanish Main before he was twenty. In its rich texture, so full of sunlight and darkness, so passionate in its life and movement, *Nostromo* is surely one of the illustrious novels of the world.

For his two earliest novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, Conrad had diverse feelings. He liked *Almayer's Folly*, but he had a sort of contempt for the *Outcast*. *Almayer* had been with him so long—he was writing it for about four years—that he had lived himself into its pages, and it always remained for him a very personal book. He wrote in my copy,

My best remembered sensation about it is the perpetual surprise that I should be able to do it at all,

and I think that that pleased surprise never left him. As for the *Outcast*, it seemed to him a sort of anticlimax. He began to write it in a mood of indecision—as may be gathered from some words he wrote in my copy,

Before beginning this book I hesitated whether I would go on writing or not

—and he finished it without conviction. And the novel has, perhaps, something forced about it which the earlier *Almayer* does not have. At any rate, it belongs to that group of Conrad's works which he himself considered as of no particular account.

And the same may be said of some of the stories in *Tales of Unrest*. For "The Idiots," a short story in the Maupassant manner, and for "The Return," which he regarded as grossly overwritten, Conrad had a positive distaste. But for "Karain" and "An Outpost of Progress" and, to a lesser degree, for "The Lagoon" he had a certain affection. But he did not place the volume among his more successful ones, though I have heard him speak freely enough of all its different stories.

But if *Tales of Unrest* was not a favourite volume with Conrad the two succeeding volumes of short stories, *Youth* and *Typhoon*, were definitely among the works which he liked. Both volumes were written in the full tide of his creative life, and he felt that in them he really had produced his desired effects. With *Youth*,

indeed, he first began to appeal to a larger public, and his note in my copy acknowledges this fact:

“Youth” and “Heart of Darkness” are the first stories of mine which attracted attention to my works in a wider sphere. Most critics dismissed “The End of the Tether” with contempt or with a few cursory remarks.

These last words sound strange to-day, for “The End of the Tether” has long since been recognized as one of the most touching of Conrad’s stories, and I think that of all his man characters he had most affection for Captain Whalley.

It was in a story like “The End of the Tether,” a long-short story, that Conrad’s leisurely method found ample scope for the development of an incident. Such another story is *Typhoon*, which, as he wrote in my copy,

Was meant to be a pendant to the storm in the *Nigger*, the ship in this case being a steamship.

But of the four tales in this volume it was, I think, for “Falk” that Conrad had the softest spot. “Falk” was a Bangkok reminiscence of his first command, and I have heard him over and over again tell with laughter the story of the editor who refused it with the words, “Why, the girl doesn’t say a single word from first to last!”

Yes, Conrad certainly felt that he had done the trick



in *Youth* and *Typhoon*. That, in fact, was the very word he would have used, for he was fond of just such colloquial expressions to explain his meaning or to describe his satisfaction without grandiloquence, as may be seen from what he wrote in my copy of *A Set of Six*,

I consider this a collection of no mean tricks.

The six stories in this volume are not usually considered among his best—indeed, there is a kind of coldness about them which is rather repellent to lovers of Conrad—and I fancy that this had some considerable influence in making Conrad dwell upon their good points. It was the artistic, rounded unity of the volume which appealed to him; and though, save for “The Duel” and, to a much smaller extent, “Gaspar Ruiz,” he did not often discuss the individual stories, nevertheless he had a regard for the collection that sometimes puzzled his friends. He seemed to be almost on the defensive about it, and he was really anxious that it should receive a recognition of a kind that it never quite did receive.

And in a sense this is true also of *Under Western Eyes*, the book which directly followed. Its power cannot altogether compensate for its coldness—a coldness that seems to be interwoven in its very essence—and its popularity was never such as Conrad hoped for. As he noted in my copy, he was induced to write *Under Western Eyes*,

By the rubbishy character of stories about Russian revolutionaries published in magazines.

And undoubtedly he composed it with that antagonism to Russian institutions and character which he always showed. Never was there a man who was less of an internationalist, but though he did not allow his art to be influenced by his dislikes, yet his dislikes in this instance did, I think, affect what one may call the warmth of his creation. He used to say that writing *Under Western Eyes* had been a frightful grind; and that maybe was partly due to the aversion with which he approached the subject.

But if I seldom discussed *A Set of Six* and *Under Western Eyes* with Conrad, this was not at all the case with *The Secret Agent*, which preceded them both. There Conrad and I were at one. How we used to talk about that book! Or rather, how I used to talk about it and with what benevolent tolerance he would listen. It is, by the way, as astonishing an example of Conrad's power of creating a world from a mere glimpse as is *Nostromo*, for, as he wrote in my copy:

This novel, suggested by the well-known attempt to blow up the Observatory in Greenwich, is based on two pieces of information: one that the perpetrator was a half-witted youth, the other that his sister committed suicide some time afterwards.

That was all.

*The Secret Agent* is an ironical book—he wrote further in my copy,

As literary aim the book is an attempt to treat consistently a melodramatic subject ironically

—but it is also a compassionate book. Even those people who say that Conrad cannot draw a woman make an exception of Winnie Verloc. Less idealized than Mrs. Gould, Doña Rita, or Mrs. Travers, who represented to him, each in her way, something of the woman of all time, Winnie Verloc is nevertheless just as moving in her more concrete presentation.

*A Personal Record* (formerly *Some Reminiscences*) was a favourite with Conrad. He wrote in my copy of it,

He who has read to the end knows all that is worth knowing of me, and though this was certainly not the case, yet the book is profoundly personal. He used, for the only time in his works, the initial of his Polish surname in signing the Preface, and that in itself shows his intimate attitude towards it. These memories of his earliest years, of his first contact with the sea and of his first attempt to write, were precious to Conrad, and he put into the recalling of them some of his most exquisite prose. It always annoyed Conrad when people argued that he should have added further chapters to this work. Had he not closed it with his first sight of the Red Ensign, and was not that the exactly correct note on which to finish?

'*Twixt Land and Sea*, which immediately succeeded *A Personal Record*, marks a milestone in Conrad's

career as a writer. It brought him a new popularity and gave him a foretaste of the immense success which his remaining volumes achieved. Presumably the time was ripe and the hour was at hand. Suddenly people's eyes seemed to be opened; the three stories in *'Twixt Land and Sea* were universally discussed and praised. My own recollection is that Conrad himself did not rate the book very highly, although he did not at all rate it as one of his failures. As may be judged from the words he wrote in my copy,

Not a bad attempt to recapture moods which I thought had passed away from me for ever,

He regarded it with complacency rather than with enthusiasm. As with *Lord Jim* and *Chance*, its popularity may have militated against it. Be that as it may, the book in itself did deserve all that was said of it. There are many people who hold "The Secret Sharer" to be the first of all Conrad's short stories, there are many who are enthralled by the reminiscence in "A Smile of Fortune" and wonder how far it is autobiographical, and there are many who think that "Freya of the Seven Islands" is too painful to read a second time.

On the subject of *Within the Tides*, his next volume of tales, the public and Conrad thought much alike. It sold well, because Conrad was now a best seller, but nobody took it very seriously, and least of all its author.

It is true that he would discuss the stories more readily than he would discuss most of those in *A Set of Six*, but in this case it was a sign mainly of his indifference, although he had a tepid liking for all of them save "The Inn of the Two Witches." He referred to them in my copy as,

A meditated attempt at four different methods of story-telling, and the book was, indeed, an effort in a lighter vein. And that is what the public itself felt—and that is all that one need say about it.

And now that I am discussing these two volumes of stories I will mention the posthumous *Tales of Hearsay*. Of its four tales only "Prince Roman" had any strong hold upon Conrad's affection, and that hold was one of sentiment rather than of conviction. As to "The Black Mate," Conrad was himself doubtful whether he would ever disinter it from the magazine in which it was buried. Sometimes, he thought he would, sometimes he thought he would not. But as the volume had to be brought up to a proper size I took my courage in my hands and reprinted it. "The Black Mate" was probably his earliest attempt at fiction, written, as to the first draft, at least, in the '80s, and its poor quality is totally un-Conradesque. Conrad had no clear recollection of its history himself. As he wrote in my copy of the privately printed edition which was produced in his lifetime.

My first book.

My best remembered sensation.  
about it is the perpetual  
surprise that I should  
be able to do it at all

Began in the spring of the  
year 1889. Finished in  
1894

Joseph Conrad.

Note in Richard Curle's copy of *Almayer's Folly*





My memories about this tale are confused. I have a notion that it was first written some time in the late '80s, and retouched later.

*Victory* was a great favourite with Conrad. In none other of his books did he assemble so many remembered figures of the past, and never did he feel more assured that he had done what he had set himself out to do. It was perhaps the book of all his books which he was most ready to discuss. I do not quite know why it was, but Conrad had a feeling akin to gaiety about *Victory*—that kind of gaiety which comes from accomplishing a work of art in one of those inspired intervals when toil itself is a pleasure. This may be a wrong interpretation, but I have no other to account for his special feeling for it.

Mingled with the tragic basis of *Victory* there is more of Conrad's typical humour than in almost any of his other books. And I will mention here that, because Conrad's sense of humour was not everybody's sense of humour he was always charmed to find someone who did appreciate it. I remember how uproariously he would laugh over that absurd fracas between Schomberg and Zangiacomo, and how pleased he was with the long pivotal conversation between Ricardo and Schomberg—a conversation on which, he told me, he had expended immense pains. As showing what Conrad thought of *Victory*, it is interesting to remember that when he made his one public appearance in New York it was from the last pages of *Victory* that he read aloud to his audience.

Undoubtedly he put *Victory* among his chief successes, but where he put *The Arrow of Gold* I am not at all sure. Indeed, it is a novel on which very varied opinions are held: I have heard it described both as his best and as his worst. It was, perhaps, more completely reminiscent than any of his other novels—he wrote in my copy,

All the personages are authentic and the facts are as stated,  
—and that made impersonal criticism of it hard for him. He had long wished to recall these episodes of his early manhood in Marseilles—he wrote further in my copy,

The subject of this piece of writing has been in my mind for many years,

—and it is gratifying for me to recall how he told me that he had dedicated the volume to “Richard Curle” because of its intensely personal flavour. But as a novel it has never been one of my favourites and, as a novel, I doubt whether it was one of Conrad’s.

I was staying with Conrad when he was writing the final pages of *The Shadow Line*. The story had been intended to make one of a volume of tales, but the reminiscence—for this, like “Falk,” is a reminiscent story of his first command—lengthened itself out into the scope of a short novel. As he wrote in my copy:

This story had been in my mind for some years. Originally I used to think of it under the name of *First Command*. When I managed in the second year of war to concentrate my mind sufficiently to begin working I turned to this subject as the easiest. But in consequence of my changed mental attitude to it, it became *The Shadow Line*.

Its composition absorbed him and he felt that in it he had again recovered the tone of those remote days of struggle and romance. He had, if I may call it so, a placid feeling about *The Shadow Line*, as if within its pages was enshrined, like a rare butterfly in a cabinet, another of his youth's most precious memories.

But if he felt placid about *The Shadow Line* he felt, I think, triumphant about *The Rescue*. And that is not surprising when we recall how the book was started early in his writing life—as he wrote in my copy,

This novel was begun third in order of composition, after *The Outcast of the Islands*,

—and how he took it up and finished it twenty years later, recapturing the lyrical mood of old and proving to himself that he could complete this novel which he had once thought was a task beyond him. I say that he recaptured the lyrical mood, and so he did; but he also smoothed down the exuberance of the earlier chapters, and thus the book is, to some extent, a compromise between the earlier and the later Conrad. What delighted him above all was the knowledge that so accurately had he struck the note that hardly anyone could spot the join.

*The Rover* and the unfinished *Suspense* were Conrad's last two novels. The first grew out of the second, and they show that in this, his latest period, a new simplification had come upon him. On several occasions when

Conrad was writing a novel he would abandon it temporarily to write a short story suggested by the novel, and here was a case in point. *Suspense* was started before *The Rover*, and it was while writing *Suspense* and because of writing it that the idea of *The Rover* suggested itself to him. And then, when *The Rover* was finished, *Suspense* was taken up again. One story lay within the other like a nest of Japanese boxes.

I do not know whether he originally intended *The Rover* to be a long-short story and whether it developed of its own accord as did *The Shadow Line*, but I do know that Conrad, if not particularly pleased with the book, was at any rate particularly pleased at having completed it. He felt that his days were numbered, he felt weary, and in these last years he had a dread of losing his creative powers. The fact that he had completed *The Rover* cheered him, and its cordial reception in the press did, without blinding his critical judgment, set his mind more at ease.

But as to *Suspense*, he had a curiously fatalistic feeling. He longed to finish it, but it was like an old man of the sea on his back, and he feared—he feared. Let me quote a typical extract from a letter to me dated February 1, 1924:

I have tackled the Novel to-day. What a lot of work there is to do yet! However I feel not so very much disgusted. 30 pp. *will have to* come out. But that's my least trouble. I feel fairly hopeful.

I presume that Conrad did remove these thirty pages, but even as it is the fragment published probably contains 20,000 words that Conrad would have eliminated. But no one could have taken the responsibility of assuming what he would have done and I felt that I had to bring it out as it was, with scarcely an alteration from the written text.

The idea of this novel had been with him for a long time. He had always been a keen student of the Napoleonic period, and his knowledge of the chaotic Europe of that age was singularly precise and co-ordinated. In 1921 he went to Corsica in order to drench himself in Napoleonic atmosphere, and I do not know of any of his books into which he had more completely lived himself. He was constantly speaking about it, not in exact terms but as one brings into any conversation the thought that is really foremost, and there is something doubly tragic in the knowledge that he was never to complete it. He once told me that if he died before it was finished he wanted me to finish it for him, but probably he had in view the chance of dying within clear sight of the goal. As it was there was nothing I could do.

There is another fragment of a Conrad novel in existence—*The Sisters*. It was begun early in his writing life and put aside when no more than 12,000 words at most had been written. *The Sisters*, it seemed to me,



bore little promise of turning into a great book: its style is rhetorical, its atmosphere heavy with the overladen richness of his earliest manner. For some reason or other he sold the copyright of this fragment, together with the manuscript, to Mr. Quinn, and it is now, I hear, to be published in a limited edition.

I wish to make this survey as complete as possible, and therefore I will deal shortly with his two volumes of essays, with his plays, and with the books he wrote in conjunction with Mr. Ford Madox Hueffer. Conrad composed many essays in his lifetime—literary, reminiscent, nautical, political, travel—and some of them show his style at its purest and his wisdom at its highest. But writing essays did not particularly appeal to him. In early days it had been a means of making money, in later days it was more a means of rest from serious work. I remember him telling me once, towards the end of his life, that if any editor were to approach me with the suggestion of an article by Conrad I was to communicate with him at once, because he felt that it was the only sort of work he was fitted for at the moment. Indeed, it is to that remark that his very fine essay, "Geography and Some Explorers," owes its existence: bearing in mind what he said, I obtained the commission for him. I will quote from a letter of his of November, 1923, when the work was just finished:

And now it's done let me thank you, my dear fellow, for shoving the thing in my way. It's obvious that for some time I have not been

fit to grapple with the novel, and it was a great moral comfort to have some work to do which I was capable of doing.

But, again, a number of essays were written simply to oblige his friends. These were the introductions he wrote for various books—introductions composed with difficulty and diffidence out of his abounding friendship. Like other famous writers, Conrad was frequently being pestered with requests to do this and that—I pestered him, too, with great success—but I think that he was always slightly doubtful as to whether his name would help their efforts. It was an indication of his modesty.

Conrad dramatized three of his own works—*The Secret Agent*, “To-morrow,” and “Because of the Dollars”—and he also, curiously enough, wrote a film scenario (in conjunction with J. B. Pinker) of his story “Gaspar Ruiz,” and translated into English a play by a Polish friend of his. But though his activities in dramatic composition were considerable, he did not regard the drama seriously. I imagine that he dabbled in play writing partly to prove to himself that any novelist could write a play and partly in the hope of making money. That he was not more successful is perhaps due to the mood in which he approached the subject.

As to the books he wrote in conjunction with Mr. Hueffer, something may be said of *Romance*, but very little need be said of *The Inheritors* or “The Nature of a

Crime." *Romance* "counts," not in a great sense but in a definite sense, but neither of the other works matters at all. Conrad himself liked *Romance* and was at pains to record the history of his collaboration in my copy of the work:

In this book I have done my share of writing. Most of the characters (with the exception of Mrs. Williams, Sebright and the seamen) were introduced by Hueffer and developed then in my own way, with, of course, his consent and collaboration. The last part is (like the first) the work of Hueffer, except a few pars. written by me. Part second is actually joint work. Parts 3 and 4 are my writing, with here and there a sentence by Hueffer.

As to *The Inheritors*, he wrote in one copy belonging to me:

The main idea of this book is wholly F. M. Hueffer's, as also most of the details. My part of the collaboration consisted mainly of thorough discussion of the episodes as they suggested themselves to us both.

And in another:

My share in this work is very small as far as actual writing goes. But it had been the cause of long and heated discussion lasting well into many nights.

If it had been possible, I think Conrad would have dropped *The Inheritors* from his collected edition, but that not being possible he merely shrugged his shoulders. I remember that he could not point out a single passage in the whole novel as definitely written by himself. He

would have preferred his name never to have been associated with it.

But if he wished he had had nothing to do with *The Inheritors*, he did not even remember, as I have mentioned in an earlier chapter, that he had had anything to do with "The Nature of a Crime" until Mr. Hueffer [now Mr. Ford] reminded him. The story had been published in the *English Review* in 1909 under the pseudonym of "Baron Ignatz von Ashendrof," and Conrad had completely forgotten all about it. He would much rather it had been left in its obscurity, but he allowed it to be reprinted at the urgent request of his collaborator. I suspect that his share in the writing of "The Nature of a Crime" was very little more than his share in the writing of *The Inheritors*.

Conrad's genius was of too individual a kind to flourish freely in collaboration, and I think it is a pity that he ever lent himself to it. At one time he suggested tentatively that I should collaborate with him; but, as I told him, this would do him harm and me no good: collaborations between famous and obscure writers lower the one reputation and bring ridicule upon the other. He never mentioned it again, and I think, indeed, it was only one of those rather vague ideas that used to pass through his head and be consigned to oblivion.

I have now given a brief sketch of what I believe to be Conrad's general views about the whole body of his work. But what he thought of it in relation to other

men's work can only be a matter of conjecture. Being what he was he could not have been blind to his own achievement, but being what he was he was content to leave the question to others and to abide time's verdict in silence.

## VI

### CONRAD'S IDEAS ON ART

MANY people have wondered how, with his first book, Conrad was able to step forth as a novelist fully armed out of his obscure and wandering life. *Almayer's Folly* is not one of his principal books, but it does show not only a powerful imagination but a mastery of technique which, I daresay, no other first novel ever showed. It has, in short, a rich maturity of its own, and it is important that we should understand the background that made it possible for Conrad to begin his literary career with so finished a work of art.

Conrad's father was a writer of note, well known in Poland to this day, so it was natural enough that Conrad should early acquire a taste for letters. He read omnivorously during his voyages—he has often described to me how he would pick up books before starting on a sea passage—and more particularly he read the best French novels. Thus, with his distinguished mind, it is scarcely surprising that he was not like a groping beginner when, at an age in which taste is already formed and vigour at its fullest, he started writing. He came to his task with a clear sense of style and overflowing with experiences. His creative genius had been given a long



probation, and when it flowered at length it flowered supremely.

We are apt to think that Conrad was unique in not being in the tradition of previous schools, but what we really mean by that is that he was not in the tradition of the English school. He was vividly influenced by certain French writers, and though, of course, he *was* a phenomenon, he was not a phenomenon without roots in the past. Like every other great writer, he owed much to those who had gone before. Above all, he owed much to Flaubert. His influence is very apparent, and it needed no particular astuteness on my part to point out, before ever I met Conrad, that the author of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* was a close student of the author of *Salammbô*. I said in that article that the artistic treatment of the sailors in the fore-castle of the *Narcissus* was of the same order as the artistic treatment of the barbarians in the gardens of Hamilcar at the beginning of *Salammbô*, and that Conrad's brief, sharp sentences in the same book remind one precisely of Flaubert in a certain mood; and I remember, when I did meet Conrad shortly afterwards, he told me that, on seeing my article, he had suddenly remembered that he had just been reading *Salammbô* before he sat down to write the *Nigger*. A good shot on my part, but as I say, not a difficult one: no more difficult, indeed, than to perceive that the triple rolls of sound so frequent in Conrad's earlier sentences were derived from a study

of Maupassant, who was fond of this device. And yet, when Conrad did write one story, "The Idiots," consciously in the Maupassant manner, the result was not an outstanding success. He could be influenced, but he was not a copyist.

No, he was not a copyist, not in the least, and it would also be an error to overrate the influences that affected him. They were very real in helping him to build his own manner, but they were soon transmuted by his native genius. More and more the models faded into the background and Conrad himself emerges. From first to last he had an intense feeling for prose and for construction, and it is this preoccupation with the technical side of writing in all its aspects which differentiates him so profoundly from previous schools of English novelists. For him a novel had to be an harmonious whole, wherein style was as much inherent in the mode of treatment as in the rhythm and the language used.

That, no doubt, is why he had such a contempt of fine writing for its own sake. The art was in the achieved total effect, and he intensely disliked the idea of having sentences, however splendid, taken out of their context and put into anthologies. He did consent finally to a little anthology of his works being produced, but this was to please an old friend who had prepared it. The whole thing went against the grain. To stress individual passages appeared to him all wrong, and he had a distaste for that type of writing which is a conscious play-

ing with words. In this respect he always spoke, apart from his book on the South Seas, with aversion of Stevenson, whom he regarded as an artist of small account. To have been called a stylist, from the mere eloquence or finish of chosen sentences, would have infuriated Conrad. In fact, I think the word "stylist" in itself, with its suggestion of preciousness, would have seemed to him the most idiotic of words.

One must remember that he had a passionate feeling for the seriousness of art. His own personality is, of course, stamped upon every page he wrote, but he subordinated it to the balanced needs of the book in hand. In his novels he had one primary object in view, and that was to present a slice of life in the most impressive manner possible; to preserve it, so to speak, from the ravages of time. But I need hardly say that it would have been useless to endeavour to pin Conrad down to a precise definition of his own aims. His books are his final answer, and who, reading them, would seek to explain Conrad by some easy generalization?

If one wanted to discover what he thought about art one discovered it through oblique hints; through knowing, for instance, what writers he admired. That was an excellent method, and it will not be out of place if I mention here the names of some of those writers. In the front rank of novelists he placed Flaubert and Turgeniev. They were for him the almost perfect artists, and yet even to them he did not give his unreserved

admiration. I remember his remarking to me once, "Marwood says that Turgenev is not very profound, and he is perfectly right—he isn't." To Conrad a novel had not only to be balanced and "written," but the subject itself and the intellectual treatment of that subject had to be adequate. I recall lending him a volume of stories by a very clever young author, and his remark as he handed it back to me soon afterwards, "Yes, a certain ability, but nothing to say." Flippant cleverness bored Conrad, and any kind of mannerism was antipathetic to him. He could not, for example, stand d'Annunzio, whom he regarded as a posturer, and even some writers whose work he liked and respected came in for hard knocks on account of their mannerisms. The artistic rectitude and probing subtlety of Henry James and Marcel Proust certainly appealed to him, but it was with qualifications. He thought that Henry James carried his method to excess in his later books and that Marcel Proust was losing himself in a kind of vast swamp.

But the occasional remarks of Conrad were, as I have said before, very liable to create a false impression: sometimes he would dwell upon the good points, sometimes upon the bad, and there were few writers about whom his views were consistently the same. Curiously enough, Dickens was one of the men he nearly always praised: his "mastery of crowds" seemed to Conrad a real achievement, and I think he admired his intense vi-

talities just as he admired the intense vitality of Balzac.

When discussing literature he did not always discuss it from the same level. I do not suppose that he thought that Anatole France and W. H. Hudson were in the first flight of creative artists, but he delighted in their beautiful clarity; their gift seemed to him, within its scope, practically beyond criticism. Indeed, he admired Hudson on the whole more than Hudson admired him, and he used to say with humorous resignation, "If I were a beastly bird Hudson would take more interest in me than he does." In the same way, Conrad liked the sharp outlines of Maupassant and Stephen Crane: and it may be said that any writer who had something to say in a tone that was fresh and sincere was sure of Conrad's friendly consideration. He was always on the lookout for new talent, and within the wide bounds of his critical appreciation his mind remained wonderfully plastic to the end.

And then, again, certain writers appealed to him personally for reasons that were not altogether artistic. His enthusiasm for the sea stories of Captain Marryat and Fenimore Cooper never waned, and he vastly preferred them to a story like *Moby Dick*. Indeed, he spoke very disparagingly to me about Melville on several occasions: he objected to his portentous mysticism. But the simplicity and accurate knowledge of Marryat and Cooper charmed Conrad, just as he was charmed by the artistry of Daudet, although he did





Mr. Epstein's bronze of Conrad





not consider Daudet a great figure. Indeed, Conrad's criticisms were frequently biassed by the personality of the writer, and one could scarcely have called him an eclectic critic, although he was so discriminating and generous a one. He wrote to Mr. E. C. Adams, "Tolstoy and Dostoievsky deny everything for which I stand," and I have little doubt that his dislike of their views made him underestimate their powers. If, on the one hand, any sign of posing offended Conrad, on the other, any sign of fanaticism offended him equally.

There were certain books which Conrad read over and over again. Of all such books I fancy that Wallace's *Malay Archipelago* was his favourite bedside companion. He had an intense admiration for those pioneer explorers—"profoundly inspired men" as he has called them—who have left us a record of their work; and of Wallace, above all, he never ceased to speak in terms of enthusiasm. Even in conversation he would amplify some remark by observing, "Wallace says so-and-so," and the *Malay Archipelago* had been his intimate friend for many years. At first sight it may seem surprising that Conrad, with his sense of style, should not have felt a certain revulsion at so formless a work. But the fact is that the directness and sincerity of writers like Wallace and Darwin enthralled him. Conrad was never finicky; as long as the writing was adequate to the subject matter his artistic convictions were satisfied.

It is necessary to understand this, because it does

differentiate Conrad so completely from those moderns whose appreciation of literature is liable to depend on æsthetic niceties. Conrad had none of that narrowness which comes from belonging to a select band, and his sympathies were not circumscribed by rules of his own making. His reading had been vast and desultory, and one only has to look at the mottoes on his title pages to see that he chose them from all kinds of writers. And yet again, that may not always have meant very much, for I remember his telling me that the motto for *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*—"My lord in his discourse discovered a great deal of love to this ship"—was found by him by mere chance. He had gone to call on, I think, Mr. Galsworthy, and while waiting in his study he picked up a copy of Pepys' *Diary* and his eye lit upon this passage. But that was probably an exceptional case. Conrad had so tenacious a memory that he would have been able to recall from a book read years before the very sentence to stand upon a title page as a suitable motto. I now wish that I had discovered from him, as far as one could discover such things from him, what his opinions about various great writers were. Would it not be attractive to know how his mind reacted to, let us say, Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, and Rabelais? Ah, well, there are many things which one might have learned once: there is nothing like death to remind us of lost opportunities.

Conrad had no illusions as to immortal fame. He

thought that his books, like all others, would be forgotten in due course, and it did not worry him in the least. The desire to express himself was a stronger urge than the hope of applause in his lifetime or of any posthumous glory. And yet, just because he did not have his eye upon the public, but wrote with selfless intensity of purpose, his books will last, in my opinion, far longer than the books of most writers. Even his earliest works are curiously free from that sense of "dating" which has affected so much that was written in the '90s. They have that air of timelessness which only the greatest art can achieve, and they have it because they were the product of no clique or fashion, which, when its force is spent, looks in a moment faded and outworn. And this was due to the quality of his mind, which did not follow the fads of the moment or allow itself to be bemused by eccentricity, but was concerned with problems of character and circumstance that are much the same from generation to generation. In talking to Conrad one always felt that he was above intellectual pettiness; and his outlook was, indeed, reflected in the tone of his work. And that is one of the reasons why to have known Conrad was to understand his writings in a way which, if not deeper than the critic's way, was at any rate of a different order of closeness.

It would be a complete mistake to suppose that Conrad excepted his own books from the frequent condemnation of his fastidious judgment. What some people

took for arrogance was a defensive armour in the face of stupidity, the flaring up of a highly strung nature when confronted with the self-satisfaction or inanity of a small intelligence. Conrad was not falsely humble about his work, but he was very far from being egotistically elated. Perfection in art seemed to him an almost impossible ideal, and he felt that his own work fell, for the most part, far short of his aim. He pursued his will-o'-the-wisp with tireless devotion, as a man is forced on and on by some inner necessity of his soul. As showing the strain under which he worked I may quote a letter he wrote to me just after he had finished *The Rover*:

You may imagine in what mental state I am. The whole thing came on me at the last as through a broken dam. A month of constant tension of thought. Could hardly bear to speak to anybody—let alone write.

But in his generous appreciation of the gifts of others he would admit time and again his own inability to attain the results they attained.

Conrad was not a student of poetry. I scarcely ever heard him mention Shakespeare, and the only poet about whom I have known him to be at all enthusiastic was Keats. And that I can understand. Keats's mind, with its sense of style and its sanity of outlook, was the type of mind that would appeal to Conrad, while I can well imagine that a poet like Shelley would have had an irritating effect on him. But, indeed, I think that

the creative artist in prose is seldom much interested in verse; the one kind of poetry is actually very far apart in its aims from the other.

But if Conrad did not care much for poetry he cared still less for the drama. He thought play writing the lowest of all forms of art—if, indeed, he thought it a form of art at all. He maintained that much unnecessary mystification was made about the difficulties of stage technique and that every subtle touch of characterization was bound to be lost in the acting. He was driven almost to distraction during the rehearsals of *The Secret Agent* by the inability of the actors to catch, or to interpret, his meaning. Indeed, he always expressed contempt for the theatre, and would talk about Ibsen—if I remember aright—as “that old fraud.” I find in one of his letters to me in 1920, when he was discussing the question of writing a cinema scenario for “Gaspar Ruiz,” some words which well describe his attitude towards the drama:

If one is to condescend to that sort of thing, well then, all considered, I prefer Cinema to Stage. The Movie is just a silly stunt for silly people—but the theatre is more compromising since it is capable of falsifying the very soul of one’s work both on the imaginative and on the intellectual side—besides having some sort of inferior poetics of its own which is bound to play havoc with that imponderable quality of creative literary expression which depends on one’s individuality.

These words seem to me to voice his views with just adequacy. I am prepared to believe that Conrad never



fully grasped the possibilities of the stage, but I think that he gauged its inherent weakness. It is a pity that he ever tried his hand at play writing. With him, as with Flaubert and Henry James, he was dealing in a medium which could not produce the effects he captured in his novels. Even to read the text of *The Secret Agent* as a play, after reading it as a novel, is to discover that the magic has largely vanished.

He was upset at the failure of *The Secret Agent* play, but he soon became philosophical and ceased to bother. What exasperated him was not so much that it was a failure, but that, just as it was taken off, it was showing signs of being a success. As a matter of fact, Conrad never even saw his play acted save at rehearsals. I sat alone with him in the Curzon Hotel on the night of its first performance, waiting there for the return of his wife and a party she had taken with her, and I do not think he seemed unduly nervous. If it was going to be a success, so much the better, but if it was not going to be a success, well, never mind: his reputation as a writer would not be in the least affected.

In truth, Conrad cared no more for reading or witnessing plays than he cared for writing them. His passionate interest was in his own art of prose, and that really *was* passionate. I have said before that he was quite content to allow posterity to judge him, but certainly he would have felt satisfaction had he been offered some national honour, such as the Order of Merit.

A number of universities did, indeed, offer him honorary degrees, but these he always declined because he felt that they ought to be reserved for men of British birth. But had he been publicly acclaimed it would, I think, have been different. That would have seemed to him a recognition of the dignity of Letters, an honour given to him as a representative of all his fellow workers. Conrad was not the sort of man to put himself in a false position, or to grudge success to any one else, but he was quite well aware that the really big sales were never achieved by work like his, and he sometimes felt rather disgusted at the thought that second-rate novels should soar into their hundreds of thousands.

It was, I think, this feeling for Letters as such that made so striking a bond between him and other literary men. At different times Conrad had been friends with nearly all the famous writers of his era, and though some of these friendships faded, others remained active to the end of his life. It is unnecessary to give a list of these names—most of them can be gathered from the *Life and Letters*—but the point I want to emphasize is that all sincere craftsmen found in Conrad a warmly sympathetic friend. He took pains to help and to advise, and his pleasure in praising has already been remarked upon. He wanted to see the art of Letters exalted, and many a writer owes him a deep debt of gratitude for his ungrudging kindness and hospitality.

And yet, curiously enough, he had little interest in

any of the other arts. It must be remembered, of course, that during his formative years he had had small chance of hearing music or studying pictures, but indeed he felt but small instinctive need of these arts. With his culture and his innate sense of values he readily recognized the good from the meretricious, but it cannot be said that either music or painting was in any degree essential to him. A friend of mine once took Conrad round the National Gallery, and he tells me that he displayed a true critical insight, but I did not hear of his going there again, and in all his conversations with me I have no recollection of his talking, save casually, about pictures. With music it was much the same. I have heard him listen to fine music with appreciation, but I do not think that music came home to him with any sure appeal. I remember once accompanying him to hear an extremely poor and almost forgotten French opera of the mid-Nineteenth Century, but I am quite certain that the pleasure he derived from it was not an artistic one, but the pleasure of awakened memories. Conrad could have gone happily enough from year end to year end without hearing a note of music or looking at a first-rate picture. They were outside his orbit, and it is safe to say that all the frantic artistic controversies that were raging around him left him entirely unmoved.

I have an idea that sculpture attracted him more than painting, and that he understood better what it was trying to do. I have sometimes thought that in the

mysterious solidity of Conrad's prose there is a kind of sculptural design, and I think he appreciated sculpture's clear and powerful lines. I remember being with him on one of the days when Mr. Jacob Epstein was moulding his head—the only other occasion on which I watched anything at all like this was when "Low" was making a caricature of Conrad for his book—and he was certainly fascinated at the progress of the work. It is a curious scene that comes back to me: Conrad sitting on a pedestal, trying to keep still while waves of expression passed over his face; and Mr. Epstein working at the clay and looking every few seconds from it to Conrad with his appraising glance. Conrad thought that Mr. Epstein's bronze was by far the most satisfying presentation of him that existed—that and Mr. Muirhead Bone's etchings of him stand out in a class by themselves among the various sculptures, drawings, and etchings of Conrad—and he spoke about it in a manner that he never used of any other work of art dealing with himself. Indeed while it was being done he wrote to me:

The bust of Ep. has grown truly monumental. It is a marvellously effective piece of sculpture, with even something more than masterly interpretation in it.

But if painting and music were relatively closed to Conrad, I believe that his love of sailing ships was in essence an artistic love. I have no wish to strain the meaning of words, but I cannot help feeling that when

he was at sea he derived, in the midst of his daily toil and discomfort, a deep artistic satisfaction from the appearance and performance of his ship and from the thought of her austere and ordered life amid the loneliness of the empty sea.

Fate played many strange tricks with Conrad, but I think that it was extraordinarily kind to him in one respect. It gave to him, of all men, the one existence he needed most for the development of his genius. He who was better fitted than any other writer to describe the might and grandeur of tropical scenes and ocean storms, to impress the very spirit of their atmosphere upon his pages, was given a chance to do those things in a manner never offered before to one of his stature. And, having lived the least artificial of lives, Conrad has really woven the spirit of the East and of the sea into the fibre of his books, and has not placed it there, as one so often finds, for the mere purpose of effect. No novelist of his genius ever had Conrad's chances, and no such chances ever found so marvellous an interpreter.

I have stated in another chapter that Conrad was not keen on discussing his books and that it was seldom that he could be induced to dwell upon their structure and technique with what one may call philosophic detachment. The artistic poise of his work meant so much to him, and he put such labour into it, that he was always on edge lest the effusiveness of uncritical admirers should touch him on the raw. The polite inquiries and



congratulations of visitors appealed little to him, although, if he liked them, he would be quite pleased. It depended on the person and the mood. In any case, all that sort of talk had nothing to do with real criticism.

But at various times he had met men with whom he did discuss the fundamentals of his art and who helped him to develop and express his own beliefs and to formulate in conscious thoughts his artistic creed. Yes, he had met a few such men, and their encouragement and criticism had meant much to him at different stages. With Mr. Edward Garnett, for example, he carried on a critical correspondence for some thirty years, and there can be no doubt that he valued his comments and his point of view. The same might be said about Mr. Ford Madox Ford, though his active influence belonged specifically to one period, and certainly it could be said, in an even more intense degree, about the late Mr. Arthur Marwood, who was his neighbour when Conrad lived at Capel House. They met every week, and I have never listened to abler talk. Marwood was a profound critic and his thought acted like a grindstone to sharpen the edge of Conrad's genius. The two men had the highest esteem for one another, and to hear them discussing literature was a revelation. Marwood's death in the early period of the war was one of the severest blows Conrad ever received.

Conrad knew that I had an enormous admiration, and a great knowledge, of his work, and I think he respected



my critical opinions up to a point. But I would not care to say more than that, although I recall with a glow of pleasure that, when I was doing an article on his collected edition for the *Times Literary Supplement*, he wrote to me:

This is an opportunity that will never be renewed in my life-time for the judgment of a man who certainly knows my work best, and not less certainly is known for my closest intimate, but before all is the best friend my work has ever had.

That was a compliment indeed! But, as I say, I doubt whether I was one of Conrad's critical intimates. I am not even sure that the things I admired most in his books were the things that he always liked most. In the thousand discussions we had together, and well as I knew him, I never felt certain that I had pierced to the central core of his thought, where all was fixed and determined. And so, when trying to explain his attitude to art, I am more than usually conscious of the merely relative value of my impressions.

## VII

### CONRAD AT HOME

LIKE so many sailors Conrad was never so happy as when he was in his own home. His dynamic spirit required the familiar atmosphere of well-known faces and accustomed objects for its peace; and the uneventful regularity of the days soothed his nerves. Whenever he stayed away he had a dread of being taken ill in a strange house, but when he was at home that tension was relieved and he was able to be himself. All this, perhaps, sounds improbable to those who have always regarded Conrad as a born wanderer, but, as I have already explained, Conrad did not really like travel for itself and much preferred the cozy warmth of the English countryside to the gorgeous panorama of the tropics or the great spaces of the sea.

As the years went on Conrad's habits became more and more sedentary. He had an extreme disinclination for exercise, and even if gout had not made walking difficult I do not think that he would ever have stirred far from his own garden. Walking for walking's sake was abhorrent to him, and what he really liked best was to sit hour after hour in his study with some easy companion, doing just precisely what the mood of the

moment dictated. To talk or to remain silent, to write when the idea took him, or to glance through a volume was, for Conrad, when in the presence of some friend whose company called for no effort, a form of relaxation. He did not like being lonely, but he did like being freed from the strain of entertaining or being entertained; and in times of lassitude he would pass whole days thus in his study, recovering gradually his drooping health and spirits.

I spent many such days with him, more, I suppose, during his last years than anybody else, and it is a comfort to me to think that he wanted to have me with him when he was in those moods which made him at once restless and unable to work. As he wrote to his wife in 1924, "I want to ask Dick to come down. *That* will do me good." And, indeed, on many occasions I got notes from him asking me to stay with him. I will quote from just one written at the beginning of 1920.

It would do me good to see you, morally and intellectually, and I hope you won't mind coming for such a short time. We will have a good long talk.

He knew that with me he could be absolutely natural and that, though very few words might pass between us for hours on end, there would never be any strain or misunderstanding. Conrad's friendship for me, as I have said before, was largely based, not only upon a communion of spirit as to our attitude to life, but upon some

mysterious sixth sense of sympathy which made explanations unnecessary.

Conrad's study at Oswalds—the only house, I imagine, where he ever had a study—was a small room, totally unpretentious but very comfortable in its lived-in atmosphere. A few family photographs were on the mantelpiece, a few pictures of ships were on the walls, but it was chiefly notable for its shelves upon shelves of books. A more miscellaneous collection could scarcely have been brought together; presentation copies of their works from innumerable contemporaries in England and America, cheap editions of famous dead authors, second-hand volumes of travel and biography, French books falling to pieces, volumes of the Navy Records Society—all were ranged cheek by jowl wherever they could find a place. Possessions meant less than nothing to Conrad, and his library, considerable as it was, was simply the automatic accumulation of years. It certainly contained rarities, for writers now celebrated had given him their earliest volumes, but the books Conrad bought for himself were invariably the cheapest available, and their only value lay in the fact that he had a habit of scribbling his initials over and over again on the fly-leaves.

Every morning, when he had finished breakfast, Conrad would go directly to his study. If the night had been a good one—and that was generally ascertainable by his greeting as soon as he arrived downstairs or even

as one passed his bedroom door—then he was always in excellent spirits at that hour, and the first thing he would do would be to walk over to the window to watch the birds hopping about his lawn. He knew nothing whatever about ornithology—Conrad's interests revolved entirely around human beings and their lives—but he derived a sort of humorous pleasure both from birds and from dogs. He liked seeing the birds hunting for their morning meal; and as for his old dog, Haji, who died in 1923, he was a favourite that was allowed much latitude. At tea time, especially, Conrad invariably patted him with casual affection and would see to it that he had a titbit. Though his liking for animals was a purely surface emotion, nevertheless it was quite real within its scope.

And after he turned away from the window, he would pick up the morning paper, glance at it, and throw it aside. I have never met a man less concerned with the current news of the day. I do not mean that Conrad did not know what was going on and was not interested in political problems; what I do mean is that he could have existed admirably without newspapers and was utterly lacking in that fever for the latest information which builds up circulations. As a matter of fact, he had very definite views about all big questions, but his ironic mind was not impressed by editorial comment and the enthusiasm of party politics left him completely unmoved. He would have been perfectly content never

to have seen a daily paper from year's end to year's end.

Yes, he would throw the newspaper aside and either take up a book or begin to talk. What did news matter provided he had the solace of literature or of friendship! Conrad was absorbed by the realities of life, and though he could amuse himself with trifles, he could not amuse himself with impersonal ephemerality. That was the complexion of his mind, and those who saw him in social moments, when he was acting the polite host or endeavouring to forget his own thoughts, little guessed that the things he said at such times had practically no significance.

I have mentioned that he disliked exercise, but there was one form of it which he tolerated, and that was a stroll round his gardens on a warm summer afternoon. There were beautiful gardens at Oswalds, old-world gardens opening one into the other through red brick walls, and many a time have I accompanied him as he went from one to the other with slow step and complacent air. And then at last, when we emerged upon the bowling green with its flaming border of flowers, he would stop for a minute to look about him and drink in the peaceful richness of the scene. The bowling green opened upon a park—for Oswalds was the dower house to a large estate—and there was something about the full glory of the summer afternoon that fitted into Conrad's scheme of a country life. He never wanted to



remain long out of doors, but he did like to feel that he was sharing, so to speak, in that English existence which had been going on for centuries.

In the modern sense of the word Conrad was not a nature lover, that is to say he was not a self-conscious rhapsodist, but all the same he vastly preferred the country to the town. Indeed, there was no season of the year in which he would not rather have been in the country. Its still restfulness had a charm for him, and though he had no philosophy of nature and would have hated the type of person who drew moral lessons from her, he found, I do believe, comfort in her healing quiet.

Above all, he liked the outlines of trees. He had some fine trees in his own grounds, one especially opposite his study window, and he would frequently say that it was in winter, when you could really see their form, that they looked their best. Over and over again have I watched him gaze at the bare branches with real enjoyment and heard him give vent to his pleasure.

Although Conrad often had to go to London on business, he was very much a hermit as far as Bishopbourne, his own village, was concerned. He entered into its life through contributing to its charities and entertainments, but he was scarcely known by sight to most of the villagers; and I suspect that they regarded him as some odd sort of writing foreigner who had fallen amongst them from the skies. I doubt whether any of them had ever even heard of any of his books, but they

all knew he was famous for some reason or other, and they all had that kind of curiosity about him one might have for a man with two heads or no legs.

At the back of Oswalds there was a covered porch facing a formal Dutch garden, and there, on mild summer mornings, Conrad would sit for half an hour before lunch and enjoy the trim beauty of the beds. My own opinion is that, profoundly and passionately concerned as he was in his creative life with the drama of human affairs, nothing to do with the outer world of the senses affected him intensely; but I think that the order and loveliness of external nature acted as a sort of panacea to the problems that disturbed his brain unceasingly. Certainly, he had a marvellous capacity for throwing off his troubles at such moments and talking with the inconsequent gaiety of a schoolboy. Just as he would laugh at the birds hopping about his lawn, pointing to one after another, so would he comment upon his flowers, as though he really had nothing else in the world to bother about.

Owing to his wife's impaired health and his own indifference, Conrad led a very restricted social life. But if he had had any wish for exalted society he could have obtained any amount of it. As a "lion" he was much sought after, and I remember with amusement that a great lady once went almost down on her knees to me in an imploring effort to get him to come to one of her parties. But occasionally he did appear in public, and I

have a vivid recollection of a letter he wrote to me describing a luncheon at the house of Lady Northcote at Eastwell Park, not far distant, at which he met the late Duchess of Albany, daughter-in-law of Queen Victoria. He wrote:

I went to lunch with Lady Northcote at Eastwell Park. The Duchess of Albany was there and also Lady Gwendolen Cecil—and *she* was very interesting and friendly. But the other too was very good, full of sense and sympathy in her talk about the European situation. Altogether a very pleasant experience.

Conrad possessed, as I have said before, the manners and breeding of a great gentleman, and had he chosen he could have cut as distinguished a figure in high society as he did in literature. But the routine bored him, and he preferred to be left to lead his own life. If he was little known to the surrounding county families it was entirely due to his own choice.

Conrad was a small eater, but, without being a gourmet, he was something of a connoisseur, and he knew what he liked. When I first became acquainted with him Mrs. Conrad did most of the cooking—even to the end she would prepare special dishes—and there was no other cooking he appreciated as much. The Preface he wrote to her little cookery book was a genuine acknowledgment of her skill, and it is not an exaggeration to say that she could tickle his palate as no professional cook could do. He enjoyed discussing the niceties of different dishes, and I must admit that if he was quick

to praise he was by no means slow to blame. It always seemed to me a delightful human trait in his character that food and wine had a real meaning for him and that he had none of that super-intellectual contempt for the pleasures of the table.

Meals, indeed, were important features of the life at Oswalds, and although existence was conducted there without formality—I never, for example, saw Conrad dress for dinner in his own house—yet there was a certain ritual that was usually adhered to. After lunch and dinner it was customary to retire to the drawing room for coffee—a fine room with its gilt chairs and Aubusson rugs—while tea was always served in what was called Mrs. Conrad’s “den.” In that room there was a small billiard table, and Conrad and I frequently used to play a game on it after tea. With the exception of chess, which he occasionally played with his younger boy, it was the only game I ever saw him indulge in, but as he was just about as bad at it as I was we did not take it too seriously.

But he was always glad to get back to his study and to that special armchair in it, facing the window, in which he spent his days. Indeed, Conrad’s home life was his study life, and I learned more about him in that small room, heard more from his lips when he was seated in his high-backed chair, than I did anywhere else. It was there that the true Conrad found his unfettered self, there that the flow of his mind, in reminis-

cence or in stress, was really free. I do not know what has happened to that armchair, but I do know that in actual fact it is the most precious of all Conrad relics. To this hour it must vividly hold the ghost of his vanished presence.

Existence, it may be judged, went on smoothly enough at Oswalds. Of course, there were disturbances—I cannot picture Conrad living in any house where there would not have been occasional disturbances—but on the whole it was a happy life. One may have had the apprehension of a sleeping volcano, but it so often did sleep that one's days were usually unruffled. Conrad was naturally considerate, and his domestic staff was not overworked. In fact, despite his agitated nature, he was undoubtedly beloved by those who served him, for he was always ready to enter into their private troubles with sympathetic interest and to render such help as he could. He gave a personal touch to the relationship of master and servant, and though he expected to be obeyed, and was obeyed, nevertheless the atmosphere was friendly and the servants felt that he was both a generous and an understanding master. Indeed, although often autocratic in his attitude, I think myself that he was sometimes too generous. My recollection is that when his head gardener undertook to sell the surplus produce of the gardens, Conrad suggested an arrangement with him whereby that fortunate man received fifty per cent. of the profits.



Needless to say, Conrad had not the remotest idea how a house was run, and got into a state of nervous irritability if anything went wrong. He expected everything to go like clockwork, and was flabbergasted—though soon resigned—if servants fell ill or desired to leave. As to household “moves,” they were a perfect horror to him, and I remember Mrs. Conrad describing to me how he retired for several days to the Pinkers when the move to Oswalds was in progress. In all this he was true to type: he never concerned himself with household details; he just thought it was a question of putting down so much money. To Conrad the management of an establishment was a natural process, and he could not for the life of him imagine why, if other houses ran smoothly, his should not. He never really lost the sea captain’s attitude of thinking that orders were given to be obeyed and that the work of a house ought to function as smoothly as that of a ship at sea.

I have described before what a wonderful host Conrad was, but I agree that he was sometimes tried by the people that his acquaintances introduced into the house. Friends of his friends were by no means always sympathetic to him. I know of one distinguished man brought there, who, as Conrad told me, boomed at him throughout the afternoon and then recited poetry with tears streaming down his eyes; and I know of another man—a man as famous for his brilliance as for the eccentricity of his opinions—who, probably to annoy



Conrad, informed him with a man-of-the-world air that all naval captains were mad. No doubt he hoped to see Conrad flare up, but Conrad was not to be so easily caught. As he said to me: "I replied, 'Of course they are all mad; it is a notorious fact.' And you ought to have seen his bewildered expression. He simply shut up."

Although Conrad liked his house to be well ordered he was, surprisingly enough, very careless about his own papers. In his latter years he had a secretary to help him with them, but all the same, they invariably seemed to me to be in a state of untidiness. I suppose it was his dislike of possessions and the many moves he had made, but at any rate he had retained practically none of the letters he had received from noted men; and even his manuscripts, as his wife has said, were only preserved by her care. His copies of his own books were mostly poor ones, and he actually did not own a first edition of his *Tales of Unrest* until I procured one for him. He had hardly any of the magazines or newspapers in which his work had been published, and there never lived a man to whom the outward signs and appreciations of authorship had less significance.

To me this disorder was deplorable, but to Conrad, who had not an ounce of the acquisitive or collecting spirit, it was completely unimportant. And after all, it made very little practical difference—that is to say, very little to Conrad, though a good deal to me—so

that one may suppose that he did right in not troubling about the things that appeared to him insignificant and petty. For the last few years, it is true, his letters were put away by his secretary, but I cannot but regret the loss of all those letters he must have received in his earlier years, of all that history of his rise to fame and of the acknowledgment of his contemporaries, which has now been practically lost for ever.

For Conrad home did not mean material possessions; it meant a place where he could be at ease in his mind and where he could do just precisely what he wanted. I really believe that if he had had a comfortable chair, a comfortable bed, an endless supply of books from the London Library, regular meals, and a succession of the friends who rested him, he might have been indifferent to everything else. He would have hated to be a slave of possessions as much as he would have hated to be a slave of ideas, and I am sure that amid the comforts of his English home, he retained completely the freedom of his mind. But of course he was deeply conscientious, and he had that philosophic conventionality which made him adhere to the outward observances of the society in which he lived.

Conrad's devotion to his wife was obvious to all who stayed with him and was touching in its completeness. His house was run much more for her comfort and convenience, crippled as she was, than for his, and no trouble was beyond his taking where she was concerned. Of

a morning, when she entered his study about noon, it was beautiful to watch him raise her hand gallantly to his lips and to hear him utter so fondly words of inquiry and affection. She was, in truth, the lady of the house, and few men could have displayed a more instinctive delicacy in making that evident.

As to his two sons, Conrad was an indulgent parent. He tried to look at life through their eyes and to give them his companionship as well as his affection. But sometimes, as was natural, his irritation would blaze out, and I am sure that, inherently English as they were, they hardly understood his Polish temperament. Occasional moments of harshness would be followed by moments of undue generosity, and they did not have the benefit of that equable temperament and fixed scheme of education which an English father usually gives his sons. Conrad had a great anxiety about their future, just as he had a great anxiety about the future of his wife, and his desire to provide for the material wants of his family never ceased to haunt him. I am not sure whether he understood his sons very well or whether his sons understood him very well; but I am sure that the affection was mutual, and that, though there was a certain fear mixed up with it on their part, there was never any kind of distrust.

In one sense, no man ever asked less of life than Conrad, because no man had a more sceptical view of the value of existence or a more modest conception of

his own needs. Day after day, when I stayed with him, I was astonished at the smallness of his personal desires. It was not only that he had no wish for possessions, but that he had no wish for show of any kind. The making of money to him was a kind of game, pleasant in that it enabled those for whom he cared to be comfortable, but almost pointless as far as he himself was concerned. And yet—here is one of the paradoxes of his character—he was an extremely extravagant man. If money had meant more to him, it would never have melted so readily; and if he could have only gone on living quietly at Oswalds, I believe that, instead of dying worth practically nothing at all in ready money, he would have died worth a considerable fortune. He had, in short, the artistic temperament, not blatantly like the man who wears long hair and a slouch hat, but deeply implanted in the very fibre of his nature. He was at once an artist with all an artist's sensibility, and a man of the world in the fullest meaning of the word.

## VIII

### CONRAD IN PROSPERITY

IT MUST always be a source of deep satisfaction to Conrad's friends that he did live long enough to taste the prosperity which was his at last. It was not only the money; it was the recognition, it was the knowledge that his work had not been in vain. He was really very well off during the final eight years of his life—one year he actually made more than £10,000—and he stood out more and more as a figure in the public eye. The money came to him after years of harassing anxieties, the popularity came to him when he had given up all expectation of it, and both together did do something, I believe, to make him feel that he was in touch with the general sympathies of the world.

I do not mean by this that Conrad ever lacked a certain kind of prestige, for, from the beginning, editors and publishers were ready to take his work and critics were friendly, but simply that he lacked a public. Nothing that anybody said made his books sell, and as he depended entirely on what he earned his whole mode of life was extremely circumscribed. When I first met him in 1912 he was still in debt and living on the most mod-

est scale. And then suddenly, almost at a bound, people were aware of him. It was not, I am sure, that *'Twixt Land and Sea* and *Chance* were more to their liking than his previous volumes, but that the moment had arrived when the accumulated effect of years was all at once apparent.

And because Conrad's fame was surely built the moment has stretched itself out indefinitely. Each new book brought him larger sales and wider fame, and in the years that have elapsed since his death the echo has gone on reverberating triumphantly. I very much doubt whether the works of any dead author of recent times have shown the vitality that Conrad's works have shown. The annual figures are astonishing, and he is now one of those classics of whom people buy a complete set as part of the furniture of their house. Poor Conrad, how he would have grimaced at this apotheosis with all its implications, but how he would have delighted to know that his family was safe!

Conrad himself was conscious of the irony of his late success. He would say to me that if only he had some of his earlier books in hand, then indeed he would have a chance of making his fortune. I could but return the obvious answer that unless these earlier books had made their appearance he would not now be reaping his reward; but of course that did not prevent him from perceiving that many of the people who expressed unbounded admiration for his novels would have been



quite indifferent to them had they discovered them a few years previously. Eulogy in the ears of fame is naturally suspect, and I dare say that that was one of the reasons why Conrad was little interested in the reviews of his books or in the talk of stray enthusiasts.

In some respects the suddenness of Conrad's celebrity was analogous to the suddenness of Meredith's after the publication of *Diana of the Crossways*. But I cannot help thinking that Conrad displayed more dignity than did Meredith in his attitude towards an unappreciative public. Conrad never lost sight of the fact that he was a foreigner by birth, and the failure of his books for years to win popularity did not sour him so much as make him question his ability to enter into the English mind. In truth, the recognition he received at length surprised him more than the lack of recognition which had hitherto been his lot, and he always regarded his popularity as a most hazardous and uncertain thing.

Indeed, he never even quite believed in his material prosperity. The more or less impersonal gratification he derived from it was tinged with doubt and with fear of the future. It appeared to him a kind of reed which might fail him at any instant, and he had no sooner committed himself to an expenditure than he began to have a panic lest he should not be able to carry it through. Every now and again he would, in a frantic endeavour to save the situation, inaugurate tiny econo-

mies that were altogether forgotten in a day or two and were never really called for in the least.

The fact is that he had known such bitter adversity that anything else seemed to be a sort of chimera. He had struggled along for many years without making sufficient to keep himself and his family, and all those who admire his works should remember with gratitude how much they owe to the foresight and generosity of the late Mr. J. B. Pinker, his literary agent since the beginning of the century, who financed him through the lean years and never lost faith in his ultimate success. No one can doubt that Mr. Pinker's practical encouragement gave Conrad that peace of mind which enabled him to produce his finest work. It is easy to argue that all this was by way of a business speculation, but it went very far beyond that. At one time Mr. Pinker stood to lose thousands of pounds that he had advanced to Conrad, and as book followed book with little sign of enhanced popularity the investment must have seemed an extremely poor one. But Mr. Pinker was not only an astute business man but a staunch friend, and Conrad himself always felt for him the sincerest gratitude and regard.

Even when the debt was liquidated and money was flowing in, Mr. Pinker's advice and help were of much importance to Conrad. He looked after his personal affairs with the greatest solicitude and oiled the wheels of Conrad's existence in a manner that nobody else could have done. An arrangement was come to by which

Mr. Pinker sent Conrad a monthly check, paid certain things such as income tax out of the funds in his keeping, and put the balance in Conrad's bank for investment. Theoretically this was an admirable idea, and if it had been kept to by Conrad he would have accumulated a considerable capital. But in practice Conrad was utterly incapable of saving. He told me once that if he had a hundred thousand pounds a year he believed he would spend it all, and though that sounds absurd I think it is not far from the mark. For nobody was ever less completely endowed with the money sense than Conrad. To his perpetual astonishment his earnings melted away and he could not for the life of him have said where they had gone. His letters to me contain innumerable references to his money affairs, and in conversation he harped upon this theme continually. Conrad was not the first man to discover that money can evaporate without showing any tangible results or that the everlasting expenditure of forgotten small sums mounts up alarmingly. But it must be emphasised that he was constantly spending money on others without thinking about it and that thus the problem of what *did* happen to his income was really baffling when he came to tackle it. His whole attitude to the subject was a temperamental one. He wrote to me in 1920:

I am spending more than I ought to—and I am constitutionally unable to put on the brake, unless in such a manner as to smash everything.

There it was! It was not that he wanted to be extravagant, but that, having committed himself to a large way of living, he positively did not know how to put an end to it.

In plain truth Conrad was one of the most hospitable and charitable of men, and when success came to him the princeliness of his nature made him lavish beyond reason. To do things for other people, to bring happiness by, so to speak, waving a wand, was so exquisitely novel an experience to him that he scarcely counted the cost. He was always helping causes and individuals, buying presents for his family and friends, and entertaining with an open handedness that went far beyond the necessities of the occasion. He would even excuse himself to me and point out that what he was doing was actually called for, but in reality he took a great deal of pleasure in being a giver and a host.

And yet in theory he was a wonderful man of business. At the start of the year he would draw up an elaborate budget and explain to me in minute detail just what he would spend in the coming months. These budgets were designed to leave him with comfortable surpluses—it was all there in black and white—and of course they would have done so had they been adhered to. But that was the last thing that ever happened. Every call found him ready, and money existed for him almost entirely to benefit others and the causes he had at heart. Even when he did once invest a few thousand pounds, which

he had received in a lump sum for certain cinema rights, it was soon sold out again, and once it had been sold it was done for.

Precise in plans, he was vague in practice, and he seldom seemed to have any clear notion even what his books were bringing in. He delighted to hear that the sales of a new book were making a new record, he enjoyed tremendously the details of arranging for collected editions and for serial rights, but all this was accompanied by a curious naïveté about money matters, and he rightly trusted Mr. Pinker so entirely that he seldom inquired how he stood.

He would calculate how much he ought to spend, and then his generosity would carry him away and he would spend far more. But though he sometimes groaned, yet as long as it could be managed he did not mind. I have scarcely ever known a man less concerned about money as money. Indeed, it might be said that he regarded himself more as a trustee of his income than as the owner of it.

And yet, with all this indifference to money, finance did have a sort of fascination for Conrad. The financial swindler, with his capacity for gulling the public and his own self-deception, appeared to him a psychological study worthy of close attention. The career of de Barral in *Chance* was based upon the career of a well-known shady company promoter, and he was fond of discussing such people. He said to me once about another equally



notorious and disreputable financier that his success was due to the fact that he never explained and never apologized: Conrad held that to be an extremely revealing trait and an admirably astute rule of conduct. He saw in such persons, as he saw in quack patent-medicine vendors—he has described this type in "The Partner"—a kind of amoral attitude to life and contempt for humanity which interested him as a novelist.

Conrad, as I have pointed out already, spent practically nothing upon himself. Even when he bought books, such as biographies published at an expensive price, he would wait till they appeared in the second-hand lists. His bedroom was furnished with severe austerity, and he was the least luxurious of men. As for clothes, I imagine that few people of his standing can have laid out less on their wardrobe. To the very last he would wear at home old jackets patched over the elbows, and though he was far from disregarding outward appearances, yet he would economize on himself rather than on anybody else. If he had only had himself to consider, Conrad could easily have lived on a few hundred pounds a year. But, of course, with his nature he would never have had only himself to consider.

All the same, he liked to do things in proper style. Conrad had a feeling for the outward proprieties of existence, and once he had set himself to live at a certain standard he was resolved to maintain that standard. It is true that his house was not conducted altogether on Eng-



lish lines, but the gardens were kept up perfectly, and the whole appearance of the place compared favourably with any country gentleman's house and grounds. He would have detested an unkempt garden as much as he would have detested a slovenly attire, and he liked his home to be adequately furnished and to run smoothly in the same way as he had liked a ship to be well found and capably sailed.

One must remember that Conrad had a leaning towards tradition and believed in those conventional observances which do not in the slightest degree affect a man's native originality. He wished to maintain the appearance of things as they had been and he would have thought it an insult, a sign of false superiority, to live among his neighbours in a manner other than that in which they lived.

Conscious eccentricity was in all forms abhorrent to Conrad. Nobody could have told from his dress that he was a literary man and he would certainly have wished to pass unnoticed in a crowd. In the same way, he had none of those slight affectations of speech or behaviour which so many men of individual genius appear to develop. Like everybody else he had his own preferences in different directions, but they were not marked and in company they were not even mentioned if there was any fear of their causing inconvenience. No one was ever put to trouble through Conrad insisting on any kind of special treatment.

Indeed, his material tastes were extremely simple. Possessions meant nothing to him and the only things he treasured at all were some memorials of his parents and his various discharge papers as a sailor. Certainly he enjoyed seeing his house fitted up with nice things, but it was always more of a recreation than of a serious interest. I remember accompanying him one day to the house in Hampstead of Mr. J. T. Wise, the book collector, and noticing clearly Conrad's mixture of surprise and indifference at that great library. The sort of books that Conrad preferred were cheap editions that he could handle as roughly as he chose, tearing open the pages and leaving the marks of his lighted cigarette upon the covers. Display and ostentation of every kind were so alien to Conrad that the doubt has sometimes occurred to me whether he was actually any happier in his prosperous than in his hard-up days. Prosperity entailed many worries, many exhausting duties, and though he was in a position at last not to skimp his generous instincts, I do not think that he himself got very much out of his wealth. It had come to him too late.

I have suggested in another chapter that Conrad was never happier than when entertaining an old friend, a friend who had known him in his obscure poverty, and I suspect that the pleasure this brought him was largely due to the fact that by giving such a friend a royal reception he was, as it were, showing that the friend's faith

of earlier years had been justified. This was, I believe, about the sweetest recompense that Conrad found in his success. I have met many of these old friends in his company, such as Mr. Edward Garnett, Mr. R. B. Cunninghame Graham, Mr. John Galsworthy, Sir Hugh Clifford, Mr. G. F. W. Hope—the oldest of all, whom he had known since the early '80s—Mr. E. L. Sanderson, Sir Sidney Colvin, Mr. William Rothenstein, and Mr. J. B. Pinker, and it would be impossible to imagine anything more charming and brotherly than Conrad's attitude to those companions of his fitter years.

It is strange to think how times altered with Conrad. I remember—as I have mentioned—when his wife did all the cooking (and what a fine cook she was!), I remember when Conrad himself drove an antiquated car, and I remember when he was selling the manuscripts of his novels at £40 apiece and thankful to get the money. With regard to that last I was, I recall, staying with him at Capel House when he looked out the manuscript of *Nostromo* to send to Mr. Quinn. To this day I can see the brown paper parcel lying on the windowsill in the dining room. Who would have imagined that a few years later it would fetch \$4,700 at auction? I fancy that the largest sum that Conrad ever got for a manuscript was £100 for *Victory*—a £100 which enlarged itself into \$8,100 when it was sold publicly in New York. (This year I have heard, though I cannot vouch for my authority, that one of his manuscripts has changed

hands for \$25,000.) But, after all, the small sums Conrad received at the time were probably as useful to him as would have been larger ones later, and his principal comment on the Quinn sale was: "I have suddenly become known to lots of people who had never heard of me before"—a comment not lacking in Conradesque irony. But, as I say, times altered with a vengeance. Overnight, as one might put it, his monetary troubles became a thing of the past and fame came knocking at his door.

It came knocking in more ways than one, and the postman's knock was, in literal truth, the most persistent of all. Conrad used to receive endless letters from strangers, and some of them were undoubtedly odd. He would say to me, "I have had a letter from a lunatic this morning," and would read out some utterly fantastic screed with shouts of laughter. But he was most good-natured and obliging in answering reasonable letters. Conrad never wrapped a mantle of intentional inaccessibility around him, and he would reply in a friendly spirit to friendly communications. Indeed, he was far too great a man to assume a haughty air, and if he was generally regarded as a mystery this was partly due to the quality of his books and partly to his dislike of self-advertisement. Conrad *was* mysterious, but not consciously—consciously he liked to keep his own personality in the background and to be gracious to all comers. Not that he was without proper pride—any one

who condescended to Conrad quickly discovered his mistake—but that he had an instinctive modesty which kept him perfectly simple in the midst of universal acclamation. And then, too, he had a sense of fun, on which I have commented before, that made him see the humorous side of any kind of extravagance. He was in the habit of talking at such moments in the manner of the Chinese he had known in the East, and would say about some silly remark, “That one big piecee lie.”

Fame, in short, left Conrad almost unmoved. It was only the outward form of his life that changed with the change in his circumstances, and this was not because he was already a man of sixty, but because he was a man of character. Conrad could never have had his head turned, and celebrity itself meant little to him, apart from the fact that it stood for recognition of his work.

But this one thing prosperity did definitely do for Conrad: it eased his physical life as disabilities grew upon him, it made it possible for him to have just that extra amount of comfort which was of such vital importance. Although Conrad used to tell me that his arteries were those of a man many years his junior, nevertheless he was growing sensibly older all the time and he could no longer have stood the harder life of earlier years. It was astonishing, indeed, that with his undermined constitution he stood it for as long as he did.

And success not only brought him the power to buy



material comfort, but it brought with it a certain freedom from toil—which was equally necessary to his health. In the last years of his life Conrad's strength was visibly on the wane, and he liked more and more to sit in his study armchair without even speaking very much. I do not imply that his mind was ever for one moment at rest, but only that he retired more into himself and let his thoughts wander at leisure without that ceaseless effort of concentration which had been his for so long.

But with its good things, fame also brought its bad. It was inevitable that once Conrad's books began to be discussed in wide circles their whole purpose was sure to be missed by masses of readers, and though Conrad was superior to criticism and quite prepared to let his work find its true level at last, nevertheless it did irritate him to be utterly misrepresented. I remember that when I brought back to him from Norway a translation of one of his books with a most lurid cover he said to me with disgust, "These people seem to think I am a sort of Jack London." It depressed him, for it was the integrity of his art that he held close to, and he hated to have its whole purpose cheapened and distorted. When, on rare occasions, he discussed with me the possibility of his being awarded the Nobel Prize—a desire to lay up a nest egg for his family made him hope for it—he felt acutely the miscomprehension about his work which was prevalent abroad. Of course he had his



intelligent foreign critics, but it was galling to him to think that many people who read him in translations regarded him as a blood-and-thunder writer of adventure stories, while accepting with solemn approval some quite inferior writers.

I expect Conrad overstated this in his own mind, but it certainly was surprising to see his name passed over so persistently for the Nobel Prize. And, indeed, it would not astonish me to hear that the dramatic quality of his work militated against it. I know that when he died an American magazine offered a large sum for permission to serialize *Suspense*, provided the trustees allowed one of a given list of authors to finish the novel. When I read this list and saw some of the names upon it I can only say that I went hot and cold all over at the thought of what Conrad would have done. It was as though it had been politely suggested that Mrs. Hemans should—for a consideration—be employed to finish Shelley's "Triumph of Time."

To appreciate Conrad's attitude to his prosperity one must, as usual, bear in mind that irony was never far away from even his most simple moods. If on the one hand he derived a natural pleasure from his achieved status, on the other he regarded it all with a sort of amused irritation. It was not his best books that had made him famous, it was not even the best things in any of his books. And now, when he was an old man, what was the use of celebrity and adulation? He wanted

peace, he did not want to be inundated with requests and questions; he wanted calm, he did not want to be the cynosure of all eyes.

And yet, of course, it brought him happiness in various ways and gave him a hold upon existence that might otherwise have been almost lacking. Conrad, as I have suggested before, was not in the least degree an embittered man, but he had sometimes felt the utter uselessness of his efforts and been oppressed by a fatal sense of impotence. And even though, later, when he became popular, he knew that the real things in his work had been missed by so many enthusiastic readers, yet the mere fact of recognition must have been a balm. Yes, I am sure it must have been that. He had captured the goal he had set out to capture and had achieved in his lifetime an unchallenged position. For though the great public did not understand him—and who did really understand him?—they recognized that he was *different*. And that in itself was a unique compliment.

## IX

### STRAY RECOLLECTIONS OF CONRAD

As I look back over my twelve years' friendship with Conrad various unrecorded incidents rise before me which, isolated though they are, I would like to preserve as adding to the completeness of the picture. Some of them, I know, are trivial, but all of them help to create, in my mind at least, the figure of Conrad, and to recall his presence and personality with a vividness of their own. Let me string a dozen such incidents together.

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When Conrad was in London I often accompanied him to his business appointments. But of all those visits the one that has left the pleasantest recollection was a visit to the office of the *Illustrated London News*, off the Strand, in the summer of 1914, where he went to correct his article on the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland*. He was received with respectful cordiality by two young journalists in a small, untidy room which looked as if it had been the very home of busy activities since the Dark Ages. Conrad sat down at a table to glance over the galley sheets, while the two young men stood, one on either side of him, as though to ward off

intruders or to see that he did his work properly. I, who was sitting opposite him, studying the proofs in my turn, had the group in front of me, and it was somehow indescribably funny, more especially as Conrad was in his liveliest mood and totally unaware of the incongruity of his presence in such a place. But while I had my own humorous angle, Conrad had his, and my self-effacement and silence on this occasion never ceased to tickle him. He used to refer to it for years afterwards, and he wrote me at the time:

I wonder what those fellows at *Ill. Lond. News* Office thought you were? From the severity of your demeanour in that hole of a place they may have thought that Conrad wanted looking after lest he should get drunk and disgrace himself if allowed to wander about town alone. I noticed they looked at you with a sort of awe, and as it were, concealed curiosity. They were evidently "*tres intrigués*." Awfully funny.

And I was only endeavouring to assume the demure demeanour of a secretary!

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Later that same summer, in the fateful days towards the end of July, we paid together a visit of a few days' duration to Sheffield. His son Borys was in for an engineering examination at Sheffield University and would be absent all day, and so I had volunteered to keep Conrad company. The hotel at which we stayed lay in the hollow of the city, sweltering in the heat of that burning summer, and of a morning Conrad and I

used to sally forth to get some air on the high ground above the town. And it was on one of those expeditions, while riding on the top of an omnibus together, that we had the first inkling of the Great War. A poster outside a newspaper shop announced the assassination of the Austrian heir.

"Look, Conrad," I said. "Look at that! The Archduke Ferdinand has been assassinated."

"That's of no importance," answered Conrad in effect. "He wasn't anybody in particular. It won't lead to anything."

With these words we dismissed the matter from our minds, like millions of other people in England were doing that morning, although as a matter of fact he referred to it, in his oblique manner, when he came to write "*Poland Revisited*," now to be found in the pages of *Notes on Life and Letters*.

Altogether it was a striking visit. At the week-end I took father and son to stay with my great friends, the Wedgwoods, at their house near Harrogate, and I am glad to think that from that visit a friendship began between the families which still exists. When Conrad came to appoint his executors he appointed Sir Ralph Wedgwood and myself.

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I have spoken elsewhere of Mr. Arthur Marwood, Conrad's neighbour at Orlestone, and I would like to

describe how we went over to see him when he lay dying in 1916. In those days Conrad drove a car himself—it was an old Ford, just a shade superior to that car which he wrote of in one of his earliest letters to me as “a puffer of archaic aspect and wheezy constitution”—and on a cold winter day, when the ground was covered with snow, we set forth to traverse the six or seven miles which divided Conrad at Orlestone from Marwood in his farm at Stouting. Conrad was not what I should call a good driver: he was much too temperamental for the job; and I remember that when the road began to get difficult owing to the snow we just turned round and came home.

It was a disappointment, but we were not to be put off. On the next occasion we tried, the roads were in better condition and we got safely to Stouting. I did not go up, but wandered about the farmyard while Conrad sat with his dying friend. After a time he came down to me and said, “I told him you were out there and he was so pleased. Poor fellow, when he dreams now he says he sees the most marvellous colours.” He died a few days later, and, as I have said before, his death made a gap in Conrad’s life that nobody else could fill.

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I saw relatively little of Conrad during the war years, but one particular recollection I have which shows his friendship at its tenderest and most beautiful. Having



left a nursing home, I was lying very ill in rather second-rate lodgings in Chelsea, and Conrad turned up one day to see me. It was not the first time he had visited me in my illness, but on this occasion he had evidently resolved to have a longer sight of his sick friend. He sat on and on beside my bed, and I finally suggested that I should try to get him a room for the night. Now Conrad was a man who, though not accustomed to luxury, had for years been accustomed to reasonable comfort, and I fear that these lodgings could not justifiably be called comfortable. Nevertheless he immediately accepted the offer and actually stayed all night in some small upper room which, I suppose, must have been the last word in dreariness. But next day he came down to breakfast as cheerful as anything; and I do think that the whole episode proves that never was there a man whose friendship had less to do with mere words or easy acts.

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I remember that when I first went on a visit to Conrad after the war I found him in bed with one of his periodic gout attacks. He had, since I had seen him last, given permission for a number of his then uncollected articles to be privately printed as pamphlets, and he had preserved a set of these to present to me. And so, after we had talked for a bit, he told me to look in one of his drawers and fetch them out. I can just picture his



Conrad standing between Captain David Bone and  
Mr. Muirhead Bone on board the *Tuscania*.



smile as he handed them over with some such words as, "I kept them specially for you." And as if that was not enough I had to bring him a pen, and he began writing his name and mine in each of them, laying them open upon the counterpane one after the other for the signature to dry, until the bed was covered.

It was a tiny incident, and yet there was something in it very typical of Conrad's warm-hearted resolve to make everything as right as it could be at once. I cannot recall how we spent the rest of the day or what we talked about, but, like a bubble of memory on the surface of oblivion, the picture of that littered bed remains clearly before me.

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I have mentioned in another chapter the strange outbursts to which Conrad was occasionally subject, outbursts so strange, indeed, that they resembled psychological storms. The most extraordinary one I ever witnessed was on the day I first went to stay with him after my return from Burma in 1921. Conrad had gone to Canterbury in his car to meet me, but, supposing that he had plenty of time in hand, had left the car at the station in charge of the chauffeur and had wandered off into the town to do some shopping. In due course I arrived to find the car, but no Conrad. I waited for a little at the station, and then, if I recollect, I went to various places in Canterbury where I might have ex-

pected to find him. And then, not knowing quite what to do and thinking that in all probability he had suddenly realized the time and had rushed out to Oswalds to greet me, I proceeded there in his car.

But as a matter of fact we had missed one another in Canterbury, and it was not until I had been at Oswalds for perhaps half-an-hour that Conrad turned up in a taxicab. I have never seen him so upset in all my life. So upset was he, in fact, that he had almost lost the power of knowing who was who and was incoherent with agitation. And yet in a few hours the storm had completely passed, and I doubt very much whether Conrad himself was conscious that there had been one.

That is why I mention such an incident. It throws a kind of light upon the mysterious mental tension of his mind, which occasionally would become unbearable, although in real truth there was no one who had a sweeter or more understanding nature. The better one got to know him the more one perceived that these rare and terrible outbursts were the result of a tortured nervous system, and that if one kept still they would vanish as if they had never been.

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Before Conrad's play, *The Secret Agent*, was put on the stage he came one day to London to be present at a rehearsal. I had asked him whether he would like to meet at lunch a very intelligent girl friend of mine.

He replied that he would. The lunch took place at the Savoy, and the talk between this girl in her early twenties and the famous Conrad was really delicious. And I do not mean that it was delicious because there was anything quaint about it, but delicious in the mutual quick sympathy of the minds and easy give and take of ideas between youth and age. I shall never forget how, coming across the lounge, I saw them sitting together on the sofa, as it might have been father and daughter. Conrad was always particularly gracious to youth. His sympathy with the younger generation had a quality of complete unself-consciousness about it, and I really do not think that he knew the meaning of the word "condescension."

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Let me describe another luncheon party with Conrad, this time in a little Soho restaurant. I had asked an odd assortment of men to meet him; there were a journalist, a doctor, an engineer, or perhaps two engineers, and myself. I think that composed the party, and certainly it was a most successful one. Conrad, as was to be expected, liked to meet men of practical attainments and to discuss with them the technique of their own professions. In a sense I think that he felt more comfortable among such people than he did among writers and artists, being able with them to find more readily a common level. He had the sort of mind which accumulates



knowledge imperceptibly, and I was always surprised at the manner in which he could discuss with practical men the problems of their own jobs. There he sat in that small and crowded room, as full of geniality as if he had been having lunch with a party of his literary friends, and probably more full of interest.

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It was at the Wedgwoods' London house, quite late in Conrad's life, that an episode took place which I shall always consider showed Conrad at about his best. The Wedgwoods had asked the Conrads and myself to dinner, and after dinner our host's brother, a member of Parliament in the Labour interest and a man of strong and radical views, came in specially to meet the celebrated author. Colonel Josiah Wedgwood sat down next Conrad in the dining room, where the men were smoking, and the two of them, conscious that they differed profoundly in politics but perfectly comfortable in each other's society, began to discuss conditions in India. The Colonel, of course, was all for greater freedom and responsibility, whereas Conrad believed in the necessity of resolute British rule, but both stood out as men in the mingled courtesy and firmness of their replies and arguments. Strangers to one another but a few minutes since, they had taken the measure of each other's sincerity at a glance and were able to state their opinions without any attempt at preamble and without

the slightest sign of personal feeling. It was not a fencing game, it was not a game of wits, it was simply a contest between two points of view held with conviction. I listened, not saying a word, and I have often wished that those who considered Conrad a man always intolerant of other points of view in politics had been present during that half hour.

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When Conrad went to America I accompanied him to Glasgow and spent the night at the hotel there with him. It was dark when we reached the station, but several of his friends and admirers were waiting on the platform, to say nothing of a man with a flashlight apparatus. That night Conrad gave a dinner in his private sitting room to Mr. Muirhead Bone, the etcher; Mr. John Bone, his brother, who is a printer in Glasgow; Mr. Neil Munro, the well-known writer of Scottish tales; some other friend whose name I have forgotten; and myself. Rather a memorable dinner. Conrad sat at one end of the table and I sat at the other, and I have never seen him lay himself out more completely to make everybody feel at home. Tired from a long day in the train and about to start upon an adventurous journey, he was yet as full of vitality as a man in the prime of life.

It was not till rather a late hour that the party broke up, but next morning Conrad was early astir and ready

for anything. I recall that as we sat about after breakfast a strange man came into the room on several occasions, stared at Conrad as though he had been an exhibit in a museum, and went out again without saying a word. It was very odd. And then Mr. Annan, the photographer, arrived, and Conrad allowed himself to be photographed in his bedroom. He was patience itself, submitting to all the orders of the assistant without a murmur, and I can see him now, shifting his head this way and that according as he was commanded. The photographs then taken are certainly the finest photographs of Conrad that exist. The one that serves as a frontispiece to this volume was done that day, and I think that individually it is the finest of all. There is a gravity about it, a feeling of distinction, that give one, so it seems to me, the very essence of Conrad's deeper nature.

And then followed the short journey down to Greenock and farewells on board the boat. Another photograph in this book, showing Conrad between two Bone brothers, the captain and the etcher, was taken almost at the moment of sailing.

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A few weeks before Conrad died I went down to Oswalds to be with him for some days while his wife was in a Canterbury nursing home, and during that visit Mr. Cunninghame Graham, one of the friends to whom Conrad was most attached, came to spend the

afternoon with him. He and Mrs. Dummet, another old friend, arrived together for lunch, and the memory of that afternoon stands out with a still clarity because we were all so happy together, and Conrad, especially, was so full of sprightliness and good-fellowship. Mr. Cunninghame Graham always affected him in this way, and it was a charming sight to see those two old friends together. After lunch we all went into Canterbury to sit in Mrs. Conrad's bedroom: everything seemed to be at set fair, and one felt that a new kind of serenity and peace had entered into Conrad's life. Yes, I think that of all my recollections of Conrad, that day gave me a sense of security more fully than any other day. But only three weeks later he was dead.

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It would be an easy thing for me to multiply such incidents indefinitely, to show Conrad in all kinds of lights and moods, to build up his image, as it were, piece by piece. But I can scarcely suppose that these little pictures have for others the significance they have for me, and therefore I shall bring this chapter to a close with a brief account of how we laid him to rest in Canterbury cemetery.

We sat, his friends and admirers, in the Roman Catholic chapel in Canterbury awaiting his arrival. And then, as if to greet him in a deeper hush of expectancy, we rose at the sound of shuffled steps outside.

He was with us again, he rested in his coffin below the altar, and yet how little he was with us. And as the service proceeded the feeling of unreality grew upon us and turned everything into an empty dream. The droning Latin, the genuflexions, the movements of the priest—all seemed a mere emphasis to utter negation. I, at least, felt a relief when the coffin was lifted up and we were able to follow it out into the sunlight.

It was the season of the Cricket Week, the chief event of Canterbury's yearly life, and the town was beflagged and full of merry crowds. Slowly we moved along, still in a kind of haunted, vacant dream, and so out into the country and to the gateway of the cemetery. And it was only there, before the open grave in the far Catholic corner, that many of us, his friends of years, really seemed to awake and experience to its full the bitter pang of parting. If in the church, amid the intoning and incense, we had felt the impression of a futile grief, here in the open air, at the very end of everything, we felt something hopelessly poignant as the coffin was lowered into the ground. Some prayers, a little singing, a sprinkling of the coffin with holy water, and all was over. I stepped forward and looked down upon the brass name plate and turned away. He was alone forever.

## X

### CONRAD AND ENGLAND

SHORTLY after Conrad's death a rumour got about that he had contemplated returning to Poland and that had he lived, it is there he would have spent his last years. I do not know how this rumour started, but I do know that it is utter nonsense. Conrad, as I have explained in a previous chapter, had the habit of voicing aloud the vague fancies that floated through his mind, and it is just possible that he may have said something that could be interpreted in this light by someone who knew him too little to appreciate the shades of value in his different utterances. On the other hand, I daresay that the whole thing is a complete invention. The idea of an exile returning home as an old man has just that sort of rounded, sentimental fitness which is enough to start a rumour. But it is time that it was finally laid: anxiously deep as were Conrad's feelings of affection for Poland, it was to England he had long since given the loyalty of his heart, and it was there that he meant to end his days.

It must be remembered that when Conrad first came to England, at the age of twenty, Poland had no individual existence at all. She was divided between



Russia, Germany, and Austria, and though, as he told me, the Austrians did treat the Poles well, while the other two governments treated them abominably, nevertheless no patriotic Pole felt any allegiance to any of these conquerors. And why should he have? By becoming a British subject Conrad was not deserting his country. He was simply becoming the subject of a nation he admired instead of the subject—he was a Russian Pole—of a nation he detested, which had sent his father into exile and hastened the death of his mother. In short, he was escaping from a legal bond galling to his pride and national sentiment by taking up the citizenship of a free land unconnected with the oppression of his country.

For nearly fifty years Conrad's life was mainly bound up with Englishmen, and England had become for him not merely his second home but the home of his closest ties and affections. And by the time Poland had obtained her independence Conrad was as much an Englishman in feeling as anybody born in England of English parents. In no country could he have lived happily save England. I am aware that in early life he toyed with the idea of becoming a French citizen, but that was before he knew England and when, as a mere youth, the intoxication of the escape from tyranny was fresh upon him.

It was the English traditions and character that made any other choice impossible. Indeed, in the stable his-

tory and venturous daring of the English, Conrad perceived the possession of those very qualities which he himself admired most of all. His British citizenship was no mere convenience; it had the value, in all the circumstances, of an inevitable step.

Like a convert to Roman Catholicism, Conrad was in some respects "more Roman than the Pope." For he had about England that idealistic conception which so many foreigners have about other countries. He had studied English history in the light of the English outlook, and his mind was stored with analogies from the past to explain the current tendency of events. He never lost, even when his feelings were most engaged, that gift of mental detachment which came from being born of a different race. England was always to him a land of a special destiny, and it has been argued, indeed, that his rooted conservatism was due to his dislike of having this idealistic conception, as I have called it, shattered.

There may probably be something in this, but in my opinion that something can easily be exaggerated. Conrad's attitude to such questions was inherent and not superimposed. He came from a country which, unlike England, does not take it for granted that a man of original genius must be a rebel by instinct, and therefore, of course, his political and social views were frequently bewildering to those very people in England who were best able to appreciate his genius. The very

fact that there may be some truth in their contention tends, I think, to make their explanation as a whole profoundly misleading. Conrad was a conservative, not because his mind was atrophied, but because he had a theory of the universe which was quite unaffected by the cries of the hour. If he hated to see the old order passing away it was because he saw its place being taken by a society without cohesion, which cared little for England's prestige throughout the world and understood not at all the significance of England's historic rôle in the councils of Europe. He knew what had made England great, and he had the utmost contempt, as I have stated before, for those social panaceas which, without fulfilling what they promise, blind men's eyes to the real problems of a nation's life.

Nothing enraged Conrad more than to be told, when he was arguing against radical methods, that he himself came from a country which had rebelled on more than one occasion. "These were patriotic uprisings," he would say, "and, moreover, the Poles have always been bitterly opposed to political assassination."

Conrad had a strong sense of reality. He was quite alert to the fact that everything was changing under his eyes and that that change was latent in the spirit of the times, but it did not prevent him deploring the abyss which he saw ahead. He had been brought up in a hard school, in which the sense of duty loyally performed was the reward of toil and the justification of

happiness, and he saw with dismay the loss of tone which was so evident in the new orientation of the public conscience. More and more he ceased to regard the present as an attractive age, and more and more his mind reverted to those eras when policies had a real objective and national life was really national.

His conservatism was not a mere selfish desire to keep things as they had been; it was a philosophic conservatism. Personally, Conrad made the best of existence. He knew that the old times had gone never to return, just as he knew that the sailing ships, which he loved so much, had vanished off the seas forever. He knew it and he accepted it, but that did not alter his convictions. He was democratic in his mode of life and in many of his sympathies, but he had little faith in democracy as a political force. He saw the world dissipating its energy in impossible dreams, and he believed that all this would only end in disillusionment and disaster.

And talking of ships, it is fair to say that the sea was one of the great ties that bound Conrad to England. Why Conrad, the child of an inland nation, should have had such a passion for the sea is one of the mysteries of personality, but that, having such a passion, he should turn towards England to fulfil it is in the natural logic of events. Our innermost history hinges upon the sea, and to the young Conrad's burning imagination the sea and England were almost synonymous terms. In Conrad's whole attitude towards the sea there was

something symbolic, and in that symbolism England herself plays a part. In the words, for example, with which he closes *A Personal Record* one perceives—not only in the lines but almost more within them, like a spiritual essence—the lofty vision, beheld by Conrad, of England and the sea bound together as one entity.

And yet, with it all, his devotion to Poland never dwindled. He rejoiced in the flood of her revived life, although he had many doubts as to her future, and he did everything in his power to keep alight the flame of her independence sprung from the ashes of the Great War. I believe I am right in saying that in the time of her financial stress he sent several thousand pounds to Poland to help his friends, and I know that he supported one of his Polish cousins for years. He kept up an animated correspondence with relatives and literary men in Poland, he entertained Poles when they came to England, and he wrote time and again on behalf of the Polish cause.

But it was typical of his modesty that whenever he was asked to use his influence he always declared that he did not believe that his name counted for anything. Yet had he desired a politician's fame there can be little doubt that, by reverting to Polish nationality, he could have attained a position not unlike that of Paderewski—a man whose personality impressed him, as he told me, more than that of anyone he had ever met. For certainly Poland regarded him as one of her



outstanding figures, a national asset, as it were, who, with his international reputation, could make his voice heard on her behalf among the peoples of the Western world. I remember, in this respect, that the last public act of Conrad's life—it was on June 11, 1924—was to come up specially to London to lunch with the Polish Minister at the Legation. I met him by appointment at the Royal Automobile Club just before that lunch, and he certainly did feel a pleasure in the official recognition thus spontaneously offered to him.

But do not let us make any mistake: his concern for Poland did not in the least impinge upon his fealty to England. They existed side by side and were essentially of a different nature. In some respects he probably understood the Poles better than he did the English, for he was one of them himself, with his European outlook, his interest in general ideas, and that intense feeling for civilization which the Poles have always cultivated as a bulwark against barbarous Russia. But at heart—in those regions beyond argument—he had become far more English than Polish. His gestures, his accent, might be foreign, but the cast of his inner mind was as English in its sympathies as was the depth of his knowledge of our language.

Conrad's mastery of English was, indeed, one of his most incredible achievements. When he first landed in England he knew only a few scattered words. But in his earliest book he already enriched our literature

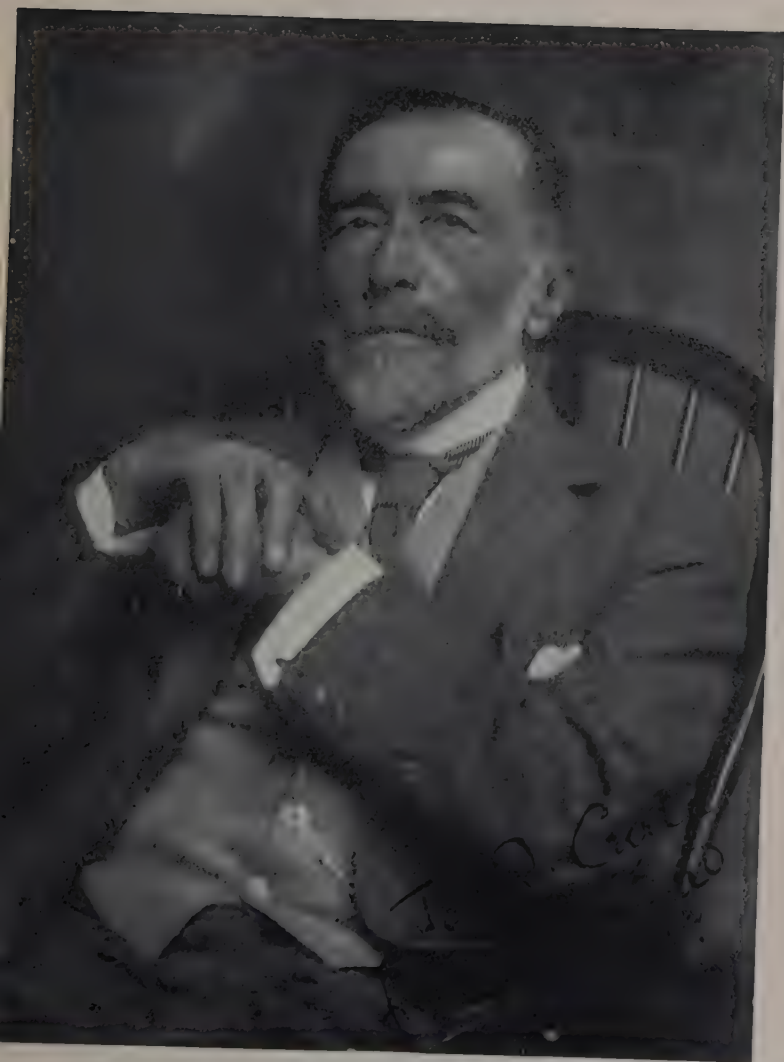


by a new, soaring note of eloquence. He is one of the great magicians of the English tongue, exotic in places, I admit, but in his latest works, at least, idiomatic and concise as few writers have ever been. Indeed, Conrad had, in certain respects, an appreciation of the niceties of English which it is rare to find amongst the English themselves. I remember that one day, when I was sitting with him in his study and he was working, he began to discuss with me possible alternative words for something he wanted to write.

“Would ‘realize’ do, Conrad?”

“No. ‘Realize’ is the sort of word I would never use. It’s a bad word.”

And of course that is so. It is subtly wrong, and though an easy way out of a difficulty (as I have often found) it ought never to be used in that particular sense. But how many Englishmen, let alone foreigners, have the precision of touch to see this? It is true that Conrad, in his earlier days, was always, like a Scotsman, making mistakes between “will” and “shall.” But—unlike many Scotsmen—he more or less mastered that problem before he was done. I recollect that when his works were being revised we made a great onslaught upon the “shalls” and put them right throughout. I daresay it would be no difficult matter to find grammatical errors in Conrad; but I am not arguing that his English was perfect, I am only arguing that he had a wonderful sense of the language. His vocabulary was



Conrad in 1919



enormous, his cadences those of a master, and his grasp of the true value of individual words very remarkable. Is it mere fancy which makes me see in Conrad's distinction in English one more intuitive proof that England was his ordained home?

And this leads me to discuss for a moment the vexed question of whether Conrad could ever have written in any other language but English. Both Sir Hugh Clifford and Mr. Ford Madox Ford have stated that Conrad once contemplated writing in French, but several times in print he has denied this with positive violence, and in conversation he used to say that the idea was utterly preposterous. It may be supposed that both Sir Hugh and Mr. Ford took seriously one of those chance remarks of Conrad's which were so misleading: certainly Conrad during all the years I knew him was not only completely unconscious of having made such a statement, but firmly convinced that he had done nothing of the sort. To him English was the language of the sea, and it would have appeared fantastic to him to assume English nationality as a seaman and then to record his memories in French. Surely Conrad's own word should count against all others, more especially when one calls to mind the manner in which he did throw off innumerable suggestions which were never meant to be taken at their face value.

Although Conrad had felt himself for so many years entirely identified with England it cannot be said that

he knew the country well. He had dwelt for a time in Essex and for a time in Bedfordshire, but it was Kent alone which really aroused and kept his affections. He had never explored England, but in his last years he did take a pleasure in being driven about the Kentish roads. There was something in the landscape and atmosphere of this county which held for him the very essence of England—its warm friendliness, unruffled continuity, and civilized comfort. Nothing would have induced Conrad to live permanently out of Kent. I recall innumerable occasions on which he and I have motored about its lanes or through Romney Marsh, stopping here and there to admire some picturesque old church or beautiful vista. They gave him immense pleasure, these drives, and he even liked getting out of the car and having tea or a drink at some small wayside inn.

He had made his home in Kent for twenty years, and there is appropriateness in the thought that in the village where he died a memorial has now been erected to his memory. It is not a cold memorial, like a statue, but a memorial which enters, as Conrad would have wished, into the very life of the village. It is, in fact, a porch added to the village hall, where people can sit and smoke in the evening and rest after the toil of the day. It lies only about a hundred yards beyond the entrance gate of Oswalds, Conrad's house, and I must confess that as I stood upon the steps of the memorial during the opening ceremony on that October afternoon

of 1927 I had the strange sensation that, were I to turn my head, I should see Conrad coming towards us. He would be walking slowly, leaning on his stick, and his face would wear a slightly mystified expression. Why had we left him to himself, and what had brought us all there? Yes, his presence was very vividly about me that day and more and more I felt that his eyes were on us, not grave and dark as from the other world, but with a kindly smiling light in them as though at last he understood what it was all about and had woken from his sleep to find himself again at home, never to wander any more.

For, in truth, Kent *was* home to Conrad, and the Canterbury district was proud of its distinguished guest. The Kentish people hoped that he would bring a Kentish background into some of his work, but I remember the Dean of Canterbury saying that when he asked Conrad whether he would not do such a thing the reply came swiftly, "I am not a topographical writer." But is it not possible that Kent was too much bound up with his life to be used in this manner? It seems to me a feasible suggestion, for Poland, which was also bound up with his most intimate life, enters scarcely at all into his books.

No one felt the war more than did Conrad. He was in Austrian Poland—a visit of which he had long cherished the thought—with his invalid wife and two young sons when it broke out, and he often described to me those



awful days of anxiety during which he heard of nothing but English disasters. Then, as he told me, he fell back upon his reliance on the stubborn resolution of the English, and fortified himself by faith and by a shrewd scepticism about what one hears in an enemy country.

But as the war went on it told heavily upon his strength. Let me give a couple of quotations from letters written to me in 1917. In March he wrote:

I am still like a man in a nightmare. And who can be articulate in a nightmare?

And in December:

All one's interior and private life is knocked into a cocked hat every morning by the public news.

They were typical exclamations. Patriotism with Conrad was something that enwrapped his being. He did not grow sentimental about it, but on the other hand he never temporized. He was not at all one of those men who want to scream at their enemies, but he knew that England was in danger and he did not allow his mind to be sidetracked by minor considerations. His whole heart was with the Allies, and his visit, at the Admiralty's invitation, to the Scottish naval ports and his voyage in a mystery ship in the North Sea were really a terrific effort for an ageing man to whom the least excitement or exhaustion was more than likely to bring on an attack of illness.

Conrad took the keenest interest in the technical side

of the war, especially of the naval war. The English leaders he admired most were Lord Jellicoe and Lord French, and he had a real regard for Admiral Bacon, the defender of the Dover Straits, whose relegation to obscurity he resented. Conrad had always been interested in naval tactics, and I daresay there were few people who had studied more minutely the naval side of the Napoleonic wars. He was never tired of reading the memoirs of admirals and generals, and he invariably had very clear ideas about questions on which the ordinary man was not usually in a position to form a judgment. His exposition of the different moves in the Great War always struck me as being singularly lucid, and his knowledge of the situation frequently produced from him sardonic comments about the ineptitude of its general conduct.

Conrad often used to say that the war had come at a fatal time for him, as it had broken in on his career just as he was beginning to make his name and he was too old, when it closed, to take advantage of his new-found popularity. And yet, if the war had to be, I am sure that he was glad that it happened in his lifetime and that he saw his ideal of England vindicated and a free, if perilous, Poland once more in being.

For about patriotism Conrad was, as about so many things, both complex and simple. Those who saw merely his impatience with persons who differed from him in their views of what one owed to one's country might

have held that he was but one of the unthinking people who, in all circumstances, say, "my country, right or wrong," and are quite impervious to any other argument. But those who knew Conrad well were conscious that his patriotism had its hidden roots in his whole theory of life, and that his convictions were those of a thinker and not of a man who takes his opinions at second-hand. Conrad's character was emotional but not sentimental: his loyalty to his country was part of his emotional life, but he was not at all beyond criticizing it and not at all led away by that blatant sentimentalism which is merely one facet of crowd psychology.

Indeed, he remained to the end very un-English in some respects. He would say in a fretful moment, "What a typically English idea!" as if it was really only the English who could be so illogical. And with all his understanding of the English as a race, he never quite lost the Continental belief in our incalculability. His mannerisms, of course, were not English at all, and I should suppose that he failed to appreciate the nuances of certain conventional, deep loyalties such as those to a public school or a regiment, or to the mere routine of ordinary English life. He certainly could not understand our passion for open windows and, I have no doubt, cold baths. He rather despised the English insularity, which so readily brushes aside what does not interest it, so easily misjudges the real aim of various movements, and has such fixed ideas. Many people, for instance, could

not get out of their heads the idea that Conrad, just because he came from Poland, must be a Jew—and this, of course, annoyed him intensely. He did not think the English were stupid, like so many foreigners do, but he thought, I imagine, that they were far too self-satisfied. I never heard him criticize Poles, but that, perhaps, was because he saw that the English not only knew nothing about Poland but cared next to nothing.

Yes, Conrad could be very impatient at the expense of the English, very sarcastic even, but those were surface irritabilities closely resembling his surface irritabilities with his friends. They counted for nothing and weighed not a jot in the balance. When he was absent from England he soon wanted to be back again, and even in Poland he would have experienced this nostalgia. I would like to quote a letter he sent me from the United States in May, 1923, just to give an idea of how firmly Conrad's affections were concentrated in England:

In the midst of New England my thoughts are fixed on *England* (*tout court*) where my affections for my family and my friends dwell immovably.

Centuries of Polish tradition had, of course, left their mark on Conrad, and what was surprising was that he should have assimilated so almost perfectly the traditions of another country. One has only to study his works to see that he comprehended the English

mind to as just a degree as any English writer of the era. He understood England basically, for, indeed, he had become part of England. It must be remembered that he had finely intuitive perceptions and had been brought into very intimate contact with those simple people, like sailors, who really do represent the most essential instincts of the English character. The bent of his mind was sympathetic to the mingled common sense and romanticism of the English. He admired their unexaggerating realism, their capacity for action and rule, and he was extremely curious to penetrate to the core and to see why it was that England had made for herself so proud a position in the world.

Conrad was never a conscious moralist, but his books, great as literature, are also great in their implied exaltation of the English. He put his finger unerringly upon the secret of England's power. It lies in that indefinable thing, the character of the nation—and Conrad has drawn that character from many angles. If England gave him her protection and her name, Conrad splendidly repaid the gift by portraying inimitably the courage, the endurance, and the compassion of the average Englishman.

## XI

### CONRAD'S FAME IN AMERICA

THE position which Conrad's name holds in America is a really remarkable one and touched with the true quality of romance. His is not only the fame of a writer, but the fame of a personality; and it is not alone fame, it is glamour, as though his genius and career had really stirred a responsive chord in the generous heart of the great Republic. His individuality has, I believe, impressed itself more firmly upon the imagination of America than that of any other contemporary author, and though tastes differ and fashions change, Conrad's reputation does seem immune from the chances of time.

I speak from the evidence of my own observation. Wherever I went in the United States, wandering from one city to another, speaking now to students, now to a general audience, I found an earnest desire to hear about Conrad, to understand the man himself, to unravel, if it were possible, the absorbing riddle of his personality. All sorts of leading questions were put to me, and not, I felt, out of idle curiosity, but with the hope of solving a problem which was both fascinating and obscure.

Creative power has, I suspect, a better hope of being



recognized in America than in England, for Americans, with their restless intellectual energy, are receptive of the unusual. And therefore it is not altogether surprising that Conrad's work, once it was discovered in America, was discovered much more enthusiastically than in England. It blossomed, it bloomed, and it has never faded. What is rather surprising is that it was not recognized years before. The opportunity was there, for even his earliest books were published in America at the time they were published in England, but the opportunity was not taken. In America, as in England, the wait was long, and it was not until the firm of Messrs. Doubleday, Page & Company gathered all his copyrights together about 1914 that he began to be widely known. To that firm, as to the late Mr. J. B. Pinker in England, all friends of Conrad owe much.

But Conrad's fame as a writer does not altogether explain his own personal standing in the United States. The mingled charm, dignity, and friendliness of his character had much to do with it, and of course there was that something more which one can only call the appeal of genius. The special trend of his mind struck a note in America which, though never heard before, has found its far-flung, thrilling echo.

But the day of Conrad's great personal prestige in the United States arrived when he himself went over to stay with Mr. F. N. Doubleday, his publisher, in May, 1923. No man of letters, not even Dickens, ever received

a more tumultuous welcome. On one morning alone between twenty and thirty reporters travelled down to Long Island to interview him in Mr. Doubleday's home, and for the whole period of his visit the American press blazed with his name. I cannot say that Conrad delighted personally in these attentions, but he recognized what they stood for and he was moved.

And what pleased the Americans particularly was that he had not come over to lecture. Americans will always listen to a famous man, but nevertheless they rather resent the fact that he is there for the express purpose of exploiting his celebrity. They feel a sort of implied condescension in this, as if the whole thing were a commercial speculation. But Conrad's visit was different; and though he did give a talk about *Victory* at the house of Mrs. Curtis James in New York, it was a friendly act and nothing else. As he wrote to me:

I made it clearly understood from the first that I was not doing this sort of thing for money. This gave my visit to U. S. a particular character, about which the press spoke out. Generally my reception in the papers was wonderful.

I heard all about this talk both from Conrad and from others. He had a horror of speaking in public—mainly, I think, because of his faulty accent, which became worse in moments of nervousness—and he had hardly ever done it. Thus it was with extreme reluctance and apprehension that he undertook to give this talk. But he was pleased with the result. As he wrote to me:

I must drop you a line to say that the evening at Mrs. Curtis James' was a most fashionable affair—and what is more a real success. I gave a talk and readings from *Victory*. One hour and a quarter, with an ovation at the end. They were most attentive. Laughs at proper places and snuffles at the last when I read the whole chapter of Lena's death. It was a great social function and people fought for invitations.

It *was* a "great social function," and though I believe that some of the guests found difficulty in following his enunciation, nevertheless it succeeded magnificently.

Sheer gratitude enabled Conrad to do a thing like this, which to him was so full of terrors. The thought of addressing an audience about his own books was painfully embarrassing, and his nerves were all on edge before the reading began. But Conrad never let a friend down, and a promise given was a promise kept. And, as a matter of fact, he even delivered one other short address when he was in America to oblige his publishers, but that was a very informal affair in the nature of a familiar discourse to some of the employees of Messrs. Doubleday, Page & Company at Garden City. My remembrance is that he told me he sat the whole time, but all the same I know that the idea of giving even this talk worried him acutely.

As I think of all this I cannot help smiling when I remember that long ago Conrad once suggested to me that he and I should tour America together and deliver a series of lectures on his books; he would discuss certain

aspects of them, while I, standing beside him on the platform, would read aloud the passages which illustrated his theme. Probably some lecturing offer had put it into his head, but of course it was just one of those wild fancies which he used to toy with and which meant nothing at all. "Oh, but what a chance you missed," lamented a lecture agent in New York when I mentioned it; "you would have cleared £40,000. What a chance, what a chance!" Maybe, but one would also, no doubt, clear a fortune if one managed to get to the moon and back and then proceeded to lecture on one's experiences.

No, Conrad would never have lectured in America, and when he went there he went in a private capacity. It was largely sentiment that dictated the journey. He felt he owed it to the many known, and to the multitude of unknown, friends he had made in the United States. It was a *beau geste* conceived in the happiest spirit, and though it was an effort that from the medical point of view was beyond his failing strength, nevertheless in the very fitness of things one cannot but be thankful that he did go. He was not well in America, but his courage carried him through triumphantly.

And he enjoyed the experience, although before he went he had written to me that he couldn't "get up any enthusiasm over it." Yes, I think he really did enjoy it, and more especially the motoring tour through New

England that he made with the Doubledays. Now and then, of course, he got rather exasperated at the irrelevant questions put to him by reporters, but on the whole he was extremely good-natured and obliging. That is the general testimony. And after all, I do not suppose that he had any requests made to him in America quite so foolish as the request once made to him in England, to write an article about the books which the murderer, Crippen, was reading on his voyage from the United States to Britain in custody. Conrad used to relate this story, years afterwards, as one of those true but incredible incidents that are beyond explanation—how he would chuckle as he piled one detail upon another!—and I feel quite certain that whatever trials he had to undergo in America paled before that experience.

I had meant to accompany him, but at the last moment this fell through, and now I am glad of it. The Americans saw him without a shadow at his elbow, and seeing him thus they were able to judge him more fairly. Conrad was absent from England only about six weeks—I saw him off from Greenock, as I have related, in the *Tuscania* and met him at Southampton when he returned with Mr. and Mrs. Doubleday in the *Majestic*—but those weeks created a Conrad legend in America that lasts vividly to this day. Americans have often come up to me and said, “I met Mr. Conrad when he was over here,” and in the very tone of their words I have felt their gratification. And often, too, they would

say to me, "How privileged you were to have known Mr. Conrad so intimately," and say it in such a manner as to show me that it was no mere compliment. Well, it *was* a privilege; it was as much a privilege on the last day as on the first.

While Conrad lived, Oswalds was a place of pilgrimage to many Americans. Some merely gazed at it and went their ways; others, armed with introductions or perhaps only with hope, called upon him. They never regretted it, and many an American he entertained became his warm friend. Conrad, indeed, got on admirably with Americans, and they, on their part, got on admirably with him. They found him more apparently accessible than are Englishmen as a rule, and when they returned to America they kept in touch with him by letters and presents. I say "apparently" because I am sure that most Americans who had met Conrad concluded, as did most English people, that he was much simpler than they expected. They went from one extreme to the other. But how far-reaching were the intellectual reservations covered by his sympathetic courtesy.

Conrad liked many Americans, but I should be a false recorder if I pretended that there were not many things in America he disliked. Indeed, it could not have been otherwise, with his traditional views and his European outlook. The rush of American life tormented him, and he was antipathetic to a certain harshness or lack of light and shade in its general tone. He said to me hu-



morously on several occasions, "Everybody in America is trying to sell something to somebody," and he maintained that the whole country was commercialized to a point where nothing else really mattered. It was not that he despised commerce—far from it—but that it seemed to him that this universal pursuit of wealth gave a kind of dead level to existence which did away with its subtler contacts. He recognized the searching quickness and eager striving of the American mind, but he feared that the tendency of the national attitude was to mould people alike.

However, one must not exaggerate all this. Conrad criticized America just as every foreigner criticizes another country, but he was profoundly grateful to America and took a delight in describing the many kindnesses he had received. His innate prejudices were mollified by his treatment, and individual Americans were among his dearest friends. Moreover, he felt a great curiosity about the future of America. He would not have cared to live there, but he watched with interest the outcome of the vast experiment of the New World. America was an enormous question mark to Conrad, and he was constantly wondering what lay in store. His was a critical mind, not prone to take things at their surface worth, and if he was a problem to Americans, America was a problem to him.

As a writer I suppose that Conrad is in America the most completely accepted of all the moderns. No doubt

there, as here, he has tens of thousands of readers who do not really appreciate him, but at any rate he is a tremendous figure. Much more of a figure actually than he is in England. I found, indeed, that to numbers of Americans he is the author of authors, the one writer to whom they pay a single-minded homage.

At first sight this was astonishing, because the kind of admiration which amounts to worship is usually bound up with a deep spiritual affinity, but I have come to the conclusion that it is the sheer exoticism of much of Conrad's atmosphere which appeals so particularly to the Americans. It is, in brief, the romance of contrast, and this would account for the fact that his most popular book in the United States is perhaps *Victory*, which is also one of his most romantic.

Yes, I believe that it is in romance that one may discover the final secret of Conrad's hold upon America. His "message" may be sought for, his methods may be discussed, but it is as a romantic figure of unique fulfillment that he enchants the public. Like Stevenson, another of America's idols, Conrad awakens the American sense of adventure and poetry. It is true that both in the United States and in England there have been writers who are said to have inherited his mantle, but of course they have not done so really and of course nobody really thinks that they have.

They would be the last to claim it for themselves, and it is pleasant to recall that some of the finest praise

he received in America during his lifetime came from American authors of distinction. Critics like Mr. Huneker and Mr. Mencken cheered Conrad by their downright fervour, and there was never a jarring note. I suppose that his first American admirer who was himself an author must have been Stephen Crane, whose work and friendship were alike precious to Conrad, but as the years went on one American author after another became aware of his books and acknowledged him as a master. Fate prevented Conrad from knowing many of them personally, although Mr. Christopher Morley was a real friend—"that dear fellow," as he called him—but I daresay he had corresponded at times with most of his American contemporaries, who one and all displayed towards him a generosity of feeling that genuinely touched him.

They justly represented American opinion. Why, I found that even to lecture on Conrad in that country was a passport to the friendship of all sorts of people. And this is a noteworthy thing. Fame naturally survives death, but it is surely rare that the mere fact of having been a famous man's friend can give one friends for one's self. Simply through the magic of his name I received kindnesses and hospitality beyond all expectation, and have, I hope, made friends I shall never lose. It is a signal witness to the force of Conrad's individuality. There are national prejudices in America as there

are in England, but Conrad overcame them more successfully than any man I have known. In himself, as in his work, there was a something that made people judge him by new and unfettered standards. Other men might be admired, other men might be popular, but there was a conquering power about Conrad which placed him upon a pinnacle and has given to his very name a peculiar significance.

Of course, like draws to like all over the world, and when I have been in America I have naturally gravitated towards those who were admirers of Conrad. But all the same, I do not think I have exaggerated unduly. To begin with, there is the obvious evidence of continued big sales and ceaseless literary comment. And then again, there is his vogue as a collectors' author, which, after all, is a clear index within its limits.

I would like to say something about this vogue because, having been a keen Conrad collector myself, I was naturally in the way of meeting other collectors when I was in the United States. They are to be found in every city, enthusiasts who really love their treasures and who are prepared to pay almost anything for what they want. Yes, almost anything. A good uninscribed copy of the rare 1913 issue of *Chance* is now worth over \$2,000; an inscribed copy would fetch about twice as much. I give this as an extreme indication of the way in which prices have risen, and will merely add that com-

petition for the really fine things is still as acute as ever.

But even more remarkable than the prices that American collectors will pay is their liberality to fellow collectors. I remember once admiring a rare book in a friend's collection and my diffident astonishment when he offered it to me at once as a present. One might have been in Turkey, with this pertinent difference, that my friend really meant it, whereas I understand that Turks do not mean it at all when they say, "All that I have is thine." And what he did, though exceptional in its degree, was not exceptional in its note. Wherever I went I found that the American collectors of Conrad's works greeted me as though I had been a brother and showered kindnesses upon me. I hope these words may meet the eyes of some of them, because the futility of spoken thanks used to leave me almost dumb.

But in judging of Conrad's popularity in America I am not mainly relying on the different manifestations of it which I have described. Just as it is neither book reviews nor advertising which really make an author, but mouth-to-mouth conversation, so in judging of fame one must not be led away by the opinions of specialized groups, but must discover what ordinary men and women are thinking. And that is just where Conrad, an author who appeals to schoolboys as well as to professors, has so universally scored in America. To discuss his works with one's chance fellow passengers and

to see their eyes light up, as eyes light up when a familiar friend is mentioned, was to gauge the true measure of his popularity. I need say no more: Conrad's name is known all over America and his works are read wherever English is read.



## XII

### CONRAD'S LAST DAY

THE thought of death had few terrors for Conrad. His health had been so bad for many years and his nerves were so ceaselessly on the stretch that he felt worn out. But the flame of his mind made rest impossible, and there was no escape for him in this world. Only a few months before he died he said to me, after one of those sudden pauses which denoted a change in the orientation of his thought, "I shouldn't be very sorry to be out of all this." It was a remark floating by chance to the surface from a deep meditation, and I have no doubt that for a long time past he had felt his hold on life growing weaker and weaker.

Indeed, he talked frequently to me about his death in a perfectly calm manner. He had, I imagine, no faith in any form of survival; at any rate, he never discussed the problem with me. But, though he wished to live a few years more—for there were books he still wanted to write—nevertheless he seemed serenely conscious that his time was short.

It was not that which worried him, it was the fear of what would happen to his family when he was gone. Often of a night he would speak about it to me for hours

together, deploring the fact that he had not saved sufficient. "But your copyrights are your savings," I always argued, doing my best to reassure and appease him. He used to beg of me in the most solemn terms to look after his family and see that everything was all right, and if he could only have foretold that his books would go on selling so wonderfully it would indeed have been a great consolation to him.

Conrad, I think, was not tired of life, but he was tired of the burden of living. His whole frame was exhausted by more than thirty years of auto-intoxication from that malarial gout contracted in the Congo in the early '90s. Perhaps it could have been eradicated from his system had he been more amenable to advice, but he was often impatient of suggestion, and his labours and his temperament allowed him no respite for recuperation. And yet, although his death still leaves a feeling of irreparable loss to all who knew him well, nevertheless one cannot but be thankful that he died in the plenitude of his powers. With no immediate foreboding he passed out of the fulness of life; he was saved from any slow decay and from the sadness of a long decline. Yes, one can be thankful for all that now, years after his death, one can be thankful that Conrad died so swiftly, but at the time it made the shock all the more appalling.

Conrad himself always believed that he would preserve his faculties to the end, because he maintained that gout, while it crippled the body, kept the brain

clear. In this respect he was forever talking about the famous Lord Holland of the Eighteenth Century and comparing their two cases. I find, indeed, his writing to me as far back as October 1918:

After sixty, one begins to count the days; and gout, however faithful, is not a cheerful companion. I am getting awfully crippled and it's about time Jessie ceased to be so. And if that happens I don't really mind very much if I have to end my days in a wheeled chair like Macaulay's Lord Holland. He kept his faculties to the end and I have the advantage over him that my wife is not a Lady Holland.

Conrad knew gout to be his sleepless enemy, but in a certain sense he regarded it also almost as a friend that would protect his mind from the ravages of old age. As for me, I had long since come to regard his gout more as a chronic trouble than as something positively sinister. I had seen him so often ill that, though I had had forebodings about him, especially latterly when there would come into his face a pinched and fallen-in look, yet I never really considered that the end was near. And I do not think that many of his friends thought so either, although just after his death I had a letter from Mr. Arnold Bennett in which he said that he had met Conrad about a year previously and "did not think from his appearance that he would live very long." But those who saw him seldom were probably more conscious of the change than those who were frequently with him and could bear witness to his cat-like vitality.

One just imagined that he would go on and on, one comforted one's self by the knowledge that the creaking door lasts long, but the truth is that his whole body was completely undermined. Like his own Captain Whalley, he had come to the end of his tether, and it is probable that no foresight or treatment could have prolonged his life for more than a few weeks.

I had no thought of all this when I arrived at Oswalds about eleven on the night of Friday, August 1, 1924. The train from Victoria had been late, owing to its being so near the Bank Holiday, and Conrad had not waited up for me, but was in bed reading. I went straight to him, and he told me to have some supper and then come upstairs to his room again for a talk. He always had supper ready for me when I travelled by this train—it was one of his charming traits that he was infinitely thoughtful in just such small things—and I remember how, on that Friday night, he jokingly described to me what I would find below. He was not at all above consulting one's taste in food and drink and of seeing to it that what he knew one liked was actually procured.

When I had had supper I went and sat by his bedside. I had done it many, many times. Of recent years he had taken to going to bed earlier, and instead of talking in his study till one or two o'clock in the morning we used generally to finish the evening in his room, where, propped up by pillows, he would discourse with all his old animation. It was a small, austere room, and on the

table by the side of the bed there was invariably a bowl of water into which Conrad would drop his cigarette ends. And as often as not several books would be lying about the bed, face downwards, which, in his solitary boredom, he had been taking up one after the other.

He appeared very well and in high good spirits. The fact that his wife, who had returned eight days previously from six weeks in a Canterbury nursing home, was again in the house had a cheering effect on him. He had hopes that this latest operation upon her knee would give her permanent relief, and that in itself was enough to make him buoyant. For his protective solicitude for her was unceasing and her perpetual suffering and ill health caused him infinite distress. He was always thinking about her, from the choosing of a present to the planning of a holiday, and his fondness for her society was touching to witness. His letters to me contain innumerable references to her health, and he endeavoured to safeguard her in every way in his power. I recall how once at the end of 1923, when he had written me a particularly anxious letter about her, he added: "Don't allude to the state of my mind when you answer this, as Mrs. C. expects to be shown your letters." Yet she, too, had to bear the brunt of his nervous depressions, and with her calm steadfastness of purpose no wife could have helped him more or saved him with surer success from unnecessary worries. Her devotion and thoughtfulness smoothed the road to his triumph.



Yes, he felt cheered by her return, and he was also well in himself that evening. He had been free from gout for some time, and he had no sense, as he so often did have, of a speedy relapse. He began by chaffing me in his affectionate way on concealing something.

"You're smiling! What is it? Have you any news for me?" . . . "Well, Dick," he burst out when I had spoken, "*I've* good news for you. I believe I've found a house."

Conrad was naturally averse to living in one house for more than a few years. He had been five at Oswalds, and delightful though it was, he had begun to get tired of it. He was rather perturbed that a minimum lease of seven years would be required for the new house, but added that perhaps he would be able to sublet it in three or four.

He was quite elated. They were leaving Oswalds, in any case, at the end of September, and the question of where to go had been worrying them all. It was his chauffeur, Vinten, who had recently discovered this other place, eight miles from Oswalds along the Dover Road, and Conrad had been over to inspect it a few days before.

"I want to take you to see it to-morrow," he said to me, and he enlarged enthusiastically—but there were often underlying tinges even in his enthusiasm—upon its aspect, its rooms, its gardens, its garage. If the landlord was prepared to instal electric light, he was prepared to pay so much more rent; what did I think of it?



He went into minute details—how pleased and eager he was!

Then he switched off the subject of the house and began to talk to me about his fragment of a novel, *The Sisters*, which, as I have already said, had been put aside many years before. Would people care to see it, he wondered? And that led him to tell me about the Preface he had just undertaken to write for a new volume of two of his plays. His mind was full of plans that night.

And then—in connection with an article in the current number of the *Times Literary Supplement*—he slipped into a kind of monologue about the Second Empire. As though he had been concerned in it himself, he discussed, with graphic asides, its tortuous policies and outstanding figures. I have spoken before about Conrad's knowledge of history, but it would really be impossible to convey the feeling of inside knowledge which his conversation suggested. He had read all the contemporary authorities and he had dramatized for himself the characters and the scenes in such a manner as to make the whole thing emerge in quite a new light. He could even vivify old history, and I remember a discussion he had with me about that "impossible person," Thomas à Becket, which made one feel as though the adviser of Henry II were but recently dead.

It was part of Conrad's inbred unself-conscious courtesy that he always seemed to take it for granted that

one knew as much as he did and had read all the obscure memoirs he had read—he was one of the widest-read men, one of the fastest and most tenacious of readers—and when a subject really interested him he would talk on it for hours, winding into its ramifications and letting it bear him on gradually into reminiscence and bypaths that were enthralling in their disclosure of his own outlook and his own thoughts.

I am not sure how long I sat with him, perhaps an hour and a half, and when I went to bed it was not only with no sense of anything wrong—I knew nothing then of the premonitory attack he had had a day or two before—but with a feeling that he was better than I had seen him for a considerable time.

Even when he had talked, as he did that evening, of the recent death of Mr. John Quinn, the American lawyer, whose great collection of Conrad manuscripts had shortly before been dispersed in New York, it did not come home to him with a reminder of his own mortality. “They get such strange diseases,” he said, speaking at large. He had never actually met Mr. Quinn: it was not like the death of a dear friend.

I went to bed, as I say, feeling quite happy about him, and at breakfast the next morning that feeling still continued. It is true that he informed me that he had not slept till four, but then he was always a poor sleeper, and he was so cheerful and apparently so well that I did not give it a serious thought. We breakfasted alone.

His wife could not leave her bed, neither of his sons was in the house, and Miss Hallows, his secretary, was on her holidays. But all the same Conrad was in the best of form. To those who know him only from his books and have formed from their lofty and often sombre pages a picture of the man himself as aloof and unapproachable, the real Conrad, the intimate Conrad of old friendships, would be unbelievable. And perhaps never more unbelievable than at that breakfast which was to be his last.

After it was over we went into his study, and he began to talk to me of the novel he was then writing, *Suspense*, and of the article, "Legends," he was just finishing. He was interested in this article, and less than a month before, on July 8th, he had written to me:

The article will be all right. It will have to do with sailors, saints, University Dons, etc.—subjects of Legend.

The hopeful way in which he spoke of this was so different from his usual tone of despondency about his work that I was agreeably surprised. There is no doubt that he did feel very well, and certainly he looked better than I had seen him look for ages.

"My mind seems clearer than it has been for months," he said, "and I shall soon get hold of my work again." These were his words, "Soon get hold of my work again." For the last few months ill health and anxiety had almost stopped him from writing.

He told me that he saw about six different lines of treatment which might be followed in *Suspense*, and of "Legends" he remarked that his hope was that it would develop naturally—this was to be one chapter—into a pendent volume to *The Mirror of the Sea*. That book had dealt mainly with the seas he had known; this was to deal mainly with the men he had sailed with.

I do not think I have ever seen him so communicative of a morning, when usually, if he was gay, he was gaily inconsequent. If it had not been for his gouty cough, which struck me as rather more troublesome than usual, I would almost have said that he had attained a new lease of life.

He rose and went to his table, and I took up the morning paper. He worked with concentration, without speaking, on something or other, and when at last, at eleven, the car was announced and he got up, I saw lying on his blotter the unfinished page 12—the whole article he had told me on the previous evening would have run to about 17 pages—of "Legends."

He talked happily in the car. He was looking forward to getting into his new home and was hoping I would approve his choice.

"We won't be able to entertain the Governor [Sir Hugh Clifford] so finely there," he observed humorously; "still, we shall be able to manage it all right."

We had gone about four miles when suddenly he passed his hand across his chest. "I feel that pain I had

a few days ago," he said. A great change had come over his features.

I suggested turning back, but he would not hear of it. "No, I dare say it's nothing. I want you to see the place."

Again I suggested turning back. It was obvious that he was suffering.

"No, no. I don't want to frighten Jessie."

"I'm sure you won't frighten her, Conrad, and I can see the house to-morrow. Do let us turn back."

This time he yielded, and the car was headed for Oswalds. We had been within a mile and a half of our destination.

"Ah! I feel better," he exclaimed. "But perhaps it was as well. One doesn't know what it'll do next. Look, she's running at thirty-five!"

The relief was only momentary, and I was thankful when we regained Oswalds.

He sat down on the settee in the hall and swallowed some hot water. It was draughts of hot water which had seemed to help him during his former attack.

After a few minutes he went to his room, and presently he had me fetched. He was sitting up in his bed and decidedly easier.

"The walk upstairs did me good," he remarked.

But that, again, was only a temporary relief, and he soon gave instructions for his own doctor from Ashford to be telephoned for.



Conrad's Grave





"I am glad it is you who are with me," he said, and added words about our friendship, beautiful and moving to remember. I sat with him a long time.

The doctor arrived early in the afternoon; he did not see him in one of his paroxysms of breathlessness, and the pulse was good. The pains shooting from one portion of his body to another resembled those of an acute indigestion. The doctor felt no disquietude. He made a careful examination, said cheering words, and left a prescription and instructions for a diet.

Conrad sent for me again. The paroxysms and the pains seemed to be increasing—"It's here—no, it's at the back—no, now it's going down my arm!"—and the intervals of ease were getting less.

"I don't like it," he said, in one of the pauses, "I've been so free from gout lately. I don't like these symptoms," and he made an ominous gesture.

Next door, Mrs. Conrad, unable to move, was lying on a couch, and I had tea with her there. During tea a telegram arrived to say that Lady Colvin, a very old friend of the Conrads, was dead.

Conrad called out, "Whom is that telegram from?"—he had heard the bell.

"It's about Lady Colvin," his wife called back.

"Is she better?"

"No, not better," answered his wife.

Conrad made no response.

Even then, unaware though I was of anything really

serious, his silence came to me with a sort of pang. It was as if he had not dared to inquire further.

About eight o'clock his two sons, his eldest son's wife, and his little grandson of six months arrived by motor from London. They had not been specially summoned—nobody realized the danger—but had come down by arrangement to spend the Bank Holiday at home. Conrad insisted on his daughter-in-law and his grandson being brought to his bedside at once: there must be no delay. It was, indeed, as though he knew that it was his last chance of seeing them.

His breathing had become very bad, and a doctor was summoned from Canterbury, which is only about four and a half miles from Oswalds, as against Ashford's sixteen. But this doctor, too, having regard to the excellence of the pulse, was not alarmed, though he ordered cylinders of oxygen to be sent out from Canterbury Hospital to relieve the breathing. It had again been better while he was there.

Perhaps it was unfortunate that the Conrads' usual Canterbury doctor was away in the country and that the one who saw him then was a stranger who knew nothing about his history or physique. And yet I do not really believe it would have made the least difference. The sands were running out. But if Conrad obtained no benefit from his advice, he did derive pleasure from his visit. He was a Scotsman, and Conrad had a particular liking for Scotsmen. He referred to him after his depar-

ture in friendly terms: even at such a time he had an eye for characteristics.

It was impossible, in face of the repeated assurances of these two skilled medical men (who must have been misled by symptoms that on previous occasions had meant little), to believe that there was anything desperately wrong. Even his dreadful fighting for breath, agonizing to witness, was assumed by all of us to have its origin in violent asthmatic indigestion; and when he panted out in one of his gasping fits that he could not get better, we, having seen him so often in illness and despondency, did not take the words at their full worth. But throughout his life he had been a man of few illusions, and I think perhaps he was under no illusion then. Heaven knows: possibly the struggle wrung this cry from him, as prophetic words are sometimes wrung from those in distress.

But his thoughtfulness for others, which was always so apparent, did not desert him. When, later in the evening, his younger son and I were in his room, he begged us to leave so that we should not have the pain of watching him suffer. "Go away, dear boys, I can't bear you to see me like this."

There was nothing more I could do, though, indeed, I had done nothing. I sat in Mrs. Conrad's room with her sons and daughter-in-law till quite late: we tried to talk cheerfully, but I am sure that each one of us felt the sense of something imminent and unthinkable in

the air. It was not so much the foreboding of an actual crisis, as a feeling of vague gloom which it was impossible to shake off.

The night passed much as the day had done. He got out of bed and insisted on sitting up in his chair, dozing off for a few minutes at a time. At six in the morning he seemed to be in less difficulty and told his eldest son that he must see about getting a male nurse, as Foote, his faithful manservant, was worn out after many hours of constant attendance. He was full of consideration and gratitude and said how finely Foote had behaved.

Later, I spoke to Foote, who told me that the night had not been a very good one, but that Mr. Conrad now appeared easier. (He had just previously called out jokingly to his wife, to relieve her anxiety, "I'm better this morning. I can always get a rise out of you!") It was as though a load had been taken off my heart. Not long after, his eldest son rushed in to fetch me. Everything was over.

At the actual moment of death nobody was in the room. Foote had gone out with a message, and Conrad was resting. There was no particular anxiety, for only half-an-hour before his pulse had been taken by Mrs. Vinten, who was a trained nurse, and found to be normal. His wife, lying powerless next door, heard a cry, "Here . . ." as if a second word had been stifled, and a fall. People ran in: he had slipped, dead, onto the floor from his chair. It was just on eight-thirty.

As I entered he was lying on his back beside the bed, where he had been laid when all efforts at resuscitation had failed. Mrs. Vinten and Foote were kneeling one on either side of him. At the opening of the door Mrs. Vinten turned round and looked up at me: the shake of her head told me everything. He looked incredibly noble and splendid. All the ravage and pain had ebbed from his features, and absolute aloofness and calm were written there. Yes, and a kind of haughty indifference which brought out startlingly the classic grandeur of his face.

To me it was as if I had never seen him till then. So absorbed!—he did not want any of us any more. I gazed at him, not for long but intently, and then I went away. I felt quite frozen.

He was at rest after suffering, and I have thought of some words out of *The Mirror of the Sea* which appear to me beautifully appropriate to the passing of his great spirit:

Nobody can say with what thoughts, with what regrets, with what words on their lips they died. But there is something fine in the sudden passing away of these hearts from the extremity of struggle and stress and tremendous uproar—from the vast unrestful rage of the surface to the profound peace of the depths, sleeping untroubled since the beginning of ages.

I could not bear to look on him again in death, who for so many years had shown me all the tenderness of a father, whose infinite understanding and unbroken



friendship had meant so much to my happiness, but I am assured that gradually the marks of age and weariness faded from his face and that his hair looked strangely black. It was as though youth had returned to him at last to stay with him for ever and comfort him even in the grave. And that is fitting—is it not?—for his works are inspired with the genius of immortal youth and his personality never grew old, never hardened, never ceased to be young in compassion and generosity.

I wandered out on to the drive. The soft morning, already warm in the full tide of summer, spoke only of teeming and joyous life. Everything was still and quiet, as it is on a Sunday in the country, and the thought of death seemed utterly incongruous. Dr. Fox of Ashford and Dr. Reid of Canterbury had been telephoned for, and their cars, standing empty before the door, gave a curiously festive effect to the solitude, as though some social gathering were in progress within the house. As I stood there I saw several strangers enter the drive gates. They, too, suggested the arrival of guests for a party. I went forward to intercept them. They were Americans and they had come, they said, to look over the house with a view to renting it. How little they suspected that upstairs the man who was probably more beloved and regarded in America than any other contemporary author was lying dead!

. . . . .

The very fact of death is subtly disintegrating, as though, with the vanishing of the personality, the memory was fading, too, and the words once spoken were growing ghostlike in the distance. With its new finality it makes of the image of even those we have loved most a thing blurred and tenuous, as if we could only catch by strained attention the faint echo of a song sung exquisitely long ago. Life keeps a friend close, for he is here in the world with you, but death, which separates, is the undermining of the prop, and in the effort to recollect you are conscious of a mistiness and a dim uncertainty. It is the cold tragedy of life that nothing survives for ever: no memory, no emotion—nothing at all; but if Conrad also will pass finally into oblivion it is good to know that the written word of his creation will make his passing slower and more august than that of most of his fellow men.

Veiled and half unreal, there slip before me a thousand fragments of talk, a thousand incidents, through which the veritable Conrad—or so I persuade myself—was gradually revealed to me by an intuitive interpretation of moods and reveries and by that unconscious filling up of gaps which never ceases in any of us.

The veritable Conrad—true; but not the whole Conrad. That, I am quite sure, was never revealed to anybody. The passionate and obscure depths of his intelligence, the mingled faith and scepticism of his philoso-

phy, the secret hopes and fears of his heart, the shadowy glimpses of him that evanescenced almost as they arose—how incommunicable! The anguish of the creative mind belonged to Conrad, and none can share that anguish with another.

THE END









